Little Happiness

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Little Happiness

by CoolBananaTheAmongUsOne

Summary

It has been an year since wall Maria's destruction and everything is going into chaos. The government is planning to disband the survey corps because of their recent failed mission, corruption inside the walls is increasing, the economic stability is faltering and Levi sits in the middle of it all, left behind at the HQ because of his sprained ankle, and he hated every single hour of his temporary vacation.

However, his little 'time off' changes when he meets three eight year old orphans from the Shiganshina district.

Or a story about Levi navigating through his new life as an adoptive father of three troublesome children.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

"This orphanage is the last place we will be in," Eren had declared loudly, to which his friends agreed wholeheartedly. After all, Eren was leading them ever since Armin's grandpa was killed in the failed attempt to retake wall Maria. And Eren's dad had disappeared to who knows where.

With no home to go to, no guardian to look after them, the three children were out on the streets to fend for themselves.

'Maybe we shouldn't have left the orphanage' Armin would think sometimes, but he knew very well that the streets were better than the orphanage they were placed in. The government was doing absolutely nothing to make the orphanages livable, leaving them no choice but to live on the streets.

Days turned into weeks and the children were in poor conditions. They began working at an eating house, but the owner would never give them their pays. All they were able to get from the job were leftovers, even that a luxury granted twice a week.

The military police would chase them off the parks and streets at night, or try to take them back to the orphanage; neither was an appealing situation.

Fed up and hungry, Armin decided to secure other means for food for himself and his friends, while Mikasa and Eren went to work. It wasn't like the owner wanted Armin working in the restaurant anyways. The latter was such a feeble boy, that the owner feared he might break a bone or two while lifting up a jug of water.

He went from one food stall to another, begging the merchants to let him borrow some food, but none had an ounce of humanity in them.

Tired and fed up, Armin decided to give one last try before abandoning the cause for good.

"Please sir, I promise to pay you back later. I would even work for free if I can't pay you back __"

"Come back when you have some real money with you kid," the merchant said monotonously. "Now go away."

As Armin turned around to leave, an apple from the cart fell to the ground and rolled towards his worn out shoes. The merchant, who was engrossed in talking with another merchant beside him didn't seemed to have noticed the fallen apple.

Armin picked up the apple and thought about running away with it. He could even lie to Eren so the latter would eat without any fuss about it being stolen, but it went against his morals. The children weren't that desperate. So, Armin decided to keep it back instead. But as reached out his hand to keep the fallen apple back on the cart, the merchant yanked his outstretched hand upwards.

"You little thief," the merchant snarled, his bad breath fanning the little blond's face. "You think you can get away with stealing from me?"

"It fell down from the cart and I was just keeping it back, I swear," Armin protested, but the merchant gave no heed to what he had to say.

"I will teach you a lesson," the merchant said as he dragged Armin forward, "you will never even think about stealing from today onwards."

"Please, I am telling the tru—"

Armin let out a gasp as another hand clutched his shoulder, yanking him back with force grater than the merchant's hold.

"What do you think you are doing?" The merchant yelled as a short man with raven hair stepped infront of Armin, shielding him from the merchant.

The man did not reply, instead he passed five apples to Armin from the merchant's cart.

"S-sir?" Armin didn't knew what to say to the gray eyed stranger who had showed up from nowhere to help a dirty looking boy from the streets.

"Here," the man said instead, throwing silver coins on the ground infront if the merchant, as if feeding seeds to pigeons. "I gave you more than what you worth honestly."

The man turned on his heels, placing his hands on Armin's shoulder as he led the blond away from the merchant who was yelling a string of profanities at the man.

"T-thank you, sir," Armin said as the duo left the marketplace.

The man just gave a slight nod in reply, his eyes fixed on the brick road ahead.

"I promise to pay you back."

"No need," the man said, looking at the little blond from the corner of eyes. "It would be best that you use the money you earn for survival instead of paying back to people who don't want it, let alone need it."

The man's commanding tone made Armin gulp nervously. He sounded like an officer giving command to his soldier's rather than a normal civilian. Armin guessed that maybe the man was not a normal civilian, rather a high ranking person judging from his pristine clothes composed of black dress pants and a spotless white ruffled shirt. A black coat was loosely hanging from the man's shoulders like a cloak.

"Make sure you take a different path to go back home, you don't want to run into that merchant again."

Armin realized that the man was implicitly telling him to part ways. With another thanks and a quick bow of gratitude, the little blond boy was off to the park where Eren and Mikasa were to meet him after work.

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The man, probably a chef judging from the greasy apron he wore, bent down and said menacingly, "I will give ya' yer money whenever I think it's fitting. If you are having such a bad time working here, I would be more than happy to call the military police to throw ya' back in the stinkin' rat hole they call orphanage."

The man then blew the cigarette in the boy's face to emphasize his words. He stood back up, staring at the coughing boy apathetically.

The other child, a raven haired girl, quickly steadied her friend, whilst glaring at the man. From the girl's posture, Levi could tell that she was getting ready to fight.

"Oi,"

Silence once again filled the alleyway as everyone turned towards Levi who stared back at them with his signature poker face.

The man swayed and narrowed his eyes at Levi, "Who the &*#$ are you?"

From the man's slurred speech and dull, half lidded eyes, Levi figured out that he was drunk and probably not in his right mind.

"What do you think you will achieve by keeping all that money?" Levi asked, completely ignoring the drunken man's question. "Apart from filling your bloated belly with greed."

"Who the &*#$ do you think you are?" The man yelled again as he stomped towards Levi, pulling out a butcher knife from his apron.

Levi only watched with mild amusement at man's sluggish attempts at swinging the butcher knife at him.

"You, come over here," The man said, swaying and stumbling back a little.

"H-hey! Don't hurt him," the boy, who had been previously watching from the side, shouted as he pulled the man's apron.

"Eren, no!" The girl shouted too as she rushed towards her friend, struggling to get the stubborn boy away from the dangerous man who was about to swing the knife at the children.

It took Levi only a second to twist the man's hand behind his back, and pin him to the ground with the heel of his shoes.

The man however, seemed more concerned for the cigarette that got crushed in the process rather than his life.

"Listen to me you buffoon, if you don't want to get arrested by the military police for illegal child labor, you better give them their money," Levi said to the man in a low and dangerous voice. "Full money," he added, twisting the man's hand a little more to emphasize his point.

The two children could only watch from the sidelines as the drunk man begged for his life while the other man dragged the drunk man like a rag doll towards the children.

It felt even more surreal to the children when they finally received the money that was being withheld unjustly from them.

"Thank you," the boy said, bowing gratefully. The girl, who had spoken no more than two words during the whole ordeal mimicked the boy, her face as emotionless as Levi's.

While the said man couldn't help but let out a tiring exhale when the two children finally left him alone with his worries.

Leaning his head back, Levi muttered under his breath, "What a day."

But little did he knew that this was not the last he had seen of the three children.

Chapter 2

"I Wonder if commander Erwin was able to persuade Aurille," Petra said as she placed a plate of pancakes on the table.

"You are talking about commander Erwin, Petra. He persuaded one if the most notorious bandits into becoming one of the best members of survey corps," Olou muttered as he popped a grape into his mouth.

"If anyone can persuade the government, it's commander Erwin," Eld said enthusiastically. "Isn't that's right, Captain?"

Levi just hummed in reply, not even bothering to respond to Oluo's comment as he poured himself some well deserved tea after a nightmare.

Well, Levi wasn't even paying attention to the conversation taking place around him, his mind too occupied to understand the meaning behin—

Levi froze and his thoughts scattered as Petra poured some honey onto her pancakes.

He stared in horror at the honey that slid down the pancake leisurely; just like the blood from the lifeless bodies in his nightmare.

The gory details of his unsettling nightmare was embedded in his mind. No gruesome scenes Levi had witnessed could compare to this nightmare, not even his best friends' deaths which had shook him to the core.

"I am going for a walk," Levi announced as he slipped on his black coat.

"You don't want to have breakfast before going outside?" Petra asked quizzically.

"I am full," Levi replied, shutting the door behind him as he exited the dining hall.

It irked him that he had to ready himself to go outside for a walk instead of gearing himself for going on a mission outside the walls. And it was all because of their pathetic government.

Levi's bitterness towards the government and the military police did not have one reason, but several; the most strongest one being the way underground people were treated and managed.

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Levi thought that a walk outside might clear his mind, but, it messed up his mind even more.

Whenever Levi's eyes would fall on a person with long brown hair, his stomach would churn as the details of his nightmare would replay in his mind: gigantic titans crushing people under their foot until all that was left of the lush green land was a flatten, barren desert filled with blood and crushed bodies.

Levi could feel the bile coming up his throat as he remembered the way organs littered the floor, that one could not avoid stepping on one if they dared to move.

Amid all the death and destruction stood a lonely person with long brown hair cascading down their face like waterfall, hiding their face from the destruction of the outside world.

Something inside Levi told him that he knew that person. His inside voice screamed at Levi to save the person, to call him, to hold him, but no matter how close Levi got, the person would be still far away from his reach.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, Levi decided to go somewhere more secluded. Besides, it angered him to see people dirtying their clothes by carelessly stomping in the muddy puddles caused by the previous night's thunderstorm.

Soon the young captain reached a small park near a creek. The soft rumbling sound of the clouds reminded him of the upcoming storm.

He inhaled the earthly smell of soil and grass dew, bringing him a temporary sense of tranquility until it was broken when he spotted a military police.

Upon closer look, he could see two pairs of struggling limbs tucked under the man's arms, and one over his shoulder.

Levi gave a knowing sigh as the three familiar struggling kids came into his view: the little blond, the feisty green eyed boy and the emotionless ravenette. What did they do now?

"Let us go!" Eren shouted as he kicked his legs.

"Shut up you brats," the middle aged red head said, his military police coat fluttering in the wind. "I am taking you back to the orphanage where filthy orphans like you belong."

The man's reply made Eren scream louder as he kicked his legs rather aggressively. Mikasa, on the other hand, was pounding her little fists on the man's shoulder in anger. It was a miracle that the man was still standing under her glare which could undead millions.

"We are not orphans!" Armin protested, trying to wiggle out of the man's strong hold.

"Then mind explaining to me why you three were camping out in this park like homeless? I have been observing you three for sometime now."

"B-because—" Armin couldn't come up with a reply for the man. How was he supposed to explain why they were camping under a makeshift tent throughout the heavy storm?

"Oi, there you three are!" A familiar voice made the children stop struggling, while the military police man stopped in his tracks.

The three orphan's eyes lit in recognition as the short (but scary) raven haired man stomped towards the four, narrowly avoiding a puddle.

"Are these yours?" The military police man asked, gesturing using his chin at the three faces who looked at Levi with pleading eyes.

Levi replied curtly with a nod, "These three ran from home because they did something stupid."

"Dad!" Armin shouted with forced tears running down his cheek. "We are sorry, we thought you will be mad at us."

"Dad," Eren cried out loudly, following Armin's lead. "Help us!"

"This big bad man is hurting us," Armin added.

"Dad!" Eren shouted again as he kicked harder. "We want to come back home."

"Papa," Mikasa said monotonously as she stretched out her palms towards Levi.

Levi cursed inwardly, unable to understand what possessed him to help those three troublesome idiots again.

"What do you think you are doing," Levi said to the man in feigned anger. He hoped his choice wouldn't lead to a bigger mess. "Let my children go."

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The thing that Levi feared happened. The military police demanded proof that the three were his children, and Levi didn't had anything to prove that.

The three brats on the other hand, refused to separate from him. They hugged him tightly as if Levi was their lifeline, all the while repeating the mantra of 'dad' and 'papa' to the point that Levi thought he would go crazy.

The man had taken them to the military police HQ for Levi to go through some 'legal procedure' to get his 'children' back.

Levi side eyed the children angrily as he signed the documents, regretting every single moment he wasted helping them.

"The military police will come to check up on you twice a month," the officer said, handing Levi another form. "We need your address."

Levi had come to a conclusion that the military police knew he was lying, and so he was being punished by being forced to adopt these brats legally.

If he were to refuse, Levi would be practically admitting defeat infront of the military police, and his pride wouldn't allow him to do that.

If he continued, he would be legally bound to these three idiots until they become adults, and the government will have three less orphans to fund the orphanage for. It was a win-win situation for the military police.

"Here," Levi almost threw the form on the officer's face in anger. Cursing himself over and over again for getting too sentimental over the three idiotic buffoons.

Levi watched as the officer read through the form, and the way his eyes got wider and wider as he proceed reading the newly filled information. A temporary sense of satisfaction took over Levi's frustration as the officer's looked at him with gaping mouth.

Soon the officer's surprise morphed into a mocking smirk.

"Tryin'a open a foster home after the scouts get disbanded, huh, captain?" The officer's said at last, leaning back into his seat.

Levi didn't fail to notice the way the green eyed kid's head perked up at the mention of the scouts, but decided to ignore it.

"Is being nosey and unconditionally lazy a requirement for becoming a military police?" Levi said monotonously. "If yes then be grateful you weren't born underground, or else you wouldn't be sitting here with that smirk of yours."

Levi exited the office before the officer had a chance to come up with a comeback. The children followed him like baby ducklings, their head hung low and eyes apologetic.

"Hey, captain Levi!"

The cold, grey eyed man looked over his shoulder to see the officer exiting his office with another mocking smile on his lips.

"You must've forgotten your way 'round the town from all that time beyond the walls. Why don't you take a carriage? I have already called one for you."

If the children weren't watching, Levi would've chucked the officer out the window instead of just silently watching him pass by.

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The ride to the HQ was mostly silent, not including the occasional questions about the scouts from the green eyed kid.

The fascination that the kid possessed for the scouts freaked Levi out. He couldn't imagine a runt like him in scouts—it would be a never ending nightmare.

On the other hand, the blond kid kept apologizing repeatedly while the girl just stared into his soul.

"I swear if you say sorry one more time—" Levi stopped halfway through is sudden outburst before composing himself again. He let out a tired sigh then continued, "This is temporary. After Hanji and Erwin are done doing their thing, I will be off on the missions beyond the walls while you three can go to another district and start a new life there. Understood?"

The three kids nodded simultaneously, the green eyed boy's eyes a little less bright after Levi's statement, while the blond kid's worries prominent on his face. The girl, however, continued staring at Levi emotionlessly.

"W-won't you like to know our names?" The green eyed runt asked. His hopeful face made Levi hesitate a little before his face turned even more cold.

"You are brat number one—" Levi said, pointing at the surprised seven year old.

"And you are brat number two—" Levi said, pointing at the blond kid.

"And you are brat number three," Levi finished as he pointed at the silent girl who looked dead inside. With that, the brief conversation ended and the occupants of the carriage returned to their own devices.

The silence of the ride allowed Levi's anger to subside, and relief flooded him as the HQ came into his view. He couldn't wait to take a nap after such a hectic day. While the three brats had their faces pressed up against the glass pane as they stared the the gigantic castle with wonder.

The rain had increased by the time Levi and the children exited the carriage, drenching them to the bone. As Levi strode towards the double doors of the stone castle, a loud splash reached his ears.

Levi's patience left his soul as he turned around only to be met with the most horrifying site Levi had ever seen—the three children, all covered in wet mud, were getting up from the dirty puddle where brat number two had fallen and the other two had tripped over him.

"Captain!" Olou, Eld and Petra exclaimed in unison as the door threw open and a very wet Levi strode in, dragging two very dirty and wet boys by the ear while an equally dirty girl followed the three, her eyes glaring daggers at Levi.

Chapter 3

Eren was on cloud nine. Yes, it's true that he was in trouble, and yes, it was also true that he and his friends had gotten one of the most strongest men, Levi, in trouble along with them, but he was with the Scout's captain for crying out loud.

Eren was practically vibrating like a cauldron on fire because of his excitement. He couldn't help but imagine all the practice and experience he would gain from just observing Captain Levi, their new adoptive dad (even though Levi had strictly ordered them to call him just Levi).

Armin's loud sneezes brought Eren back to reality, the former looking a little red. Eren could see Armin swaying a little back and forth in his seat, probably because of dizziness.

"Are you alright?"

Armin replied to Eren with another sneeze and a mildly annoyed 'no', all the while struggling to free his hand from the long sleeves of the oversized shirt Levi had borrowed to him and Eren. The said man, though, was nowhere to be seen in the common room.

The only occupants of the dark room were Armin and Eren, who were huddled in front of the red brick fireplace.

"You also look a bit red," Eren said again as he reached out his palm to check the sneezing blonde's temperature.

"I am okay," Armin replied, pulling away before Eren's hand (half hidden under the sleeve) could even make contact with Armin's forehead. "It's probably just the fire."

The fire crackled loudly as if to emphasize Armin's point, but Eren clearly was not buying it.

However, before Eren could inquire further, the double door to the common room flung open, revealing a woman with short blond hair. She was carrying an embarrassed Mikasa in her arms, the latter shrinking back into her scarf as Armin and Eren came into her view.

"You look so adorable," Petra cooed, nuzzling her nose in Mikasa's cubby cheeks, making Mikasa shrink back further into her scarf.

Mikasa was wearing a white, laced shirt that came to her knees. The frills adorning the area around the neck were barely visible under the thick, worn-out scarf she wore. A brown bow was wrapped around Mikasa's tiny waist, making the oversized shirt look like a dress.

The sleeves were rolled up to the ravenette's elbows, displaying the white strip of cloth wrapped around her wrist.

At least Petra had tried to make the clothes fit Mikasa's size. Levi, on the other hand, had smacked Armin and Eren in the face with the pair of shirts and small pants, ordering them to

get out of his site. Even the black pants, which were supposed to fit them, had long trouser cuffs that went over their feet.

Speaking of the devil, the said man was striding into the common room, reprimanding Petra for babying Mikasa.

"Put her down, Petra," he said, eyeing the ravenette. "She can use her legs to walk."

"B-but captain, she looks so small and fragile," Petra protested as she hugged Mikasa even tighter. Against Petra, Mikasa looked like a life size doll.

"She is eight."

Before the conversation could continue further, Armin's loud sneezes drew all attention to the sniffing seven-year-old instead.

"Did you catch a cold or something, brat?" Levi asked as he harshly brushed a piece of lint off Eren's brown hair with a grimace.

Instead of the usual polite and concise answer everyone expected, Armin replied with a loud and cranky cry.

"My ear hurts," he whined, bringing his hands to cover his ears. Though, he did not succeed in doing so because of the long sleeves that were in his way, making him even more cranky, "My legs too!"

Levi squatted in front of Armin, bringing his hand to check the latter's temperature who was continuously crying.

Levi's loud string of curses resonated in the common room, making Petra gasp and cover Mikasa's ears before quickly hurrying to Eren and covering his as well.

"You have a fever, a bad one," Levi announced as he got up, brushing the dust off his pants before turning to where the other three occupants of the room stood.

"Brat one and three," the said two 'brats' shifted their attention from the crying blond to the towering captain. "Go and eat something with Petra. Don't cause any trouble—" Armin's cry grew a pitch louder, making Levi pinch the bridge of his nose as he continued in a frustrated mutter, "—While I take care of this mess."

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"Get up, brat," Levi said monotonously after Petra had taken the other two children to the dining hall.

Armin's cries had subsided to sniffles, his little nose pink because of the cold, as he looked up at Levi with doe-like eyes. With an unsteady hand, Armin pushed himself to his feet, staggering a little before falling back on his bum.
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"Tsk," Levi rolled his eyes before hesitantly bending down towards Armin. "Remember, brat, this is the first and the last time you are going to be helped like this by me. So, you better learn to walk on your own despite the circumstances," Levi whispered before picking up Armin by the armpits and settling the little seven year old against his chest. "No one is going to carry you your whole life. All they will do is call you a burden."

Armin, however, did not have the energy to give a coherent response, so he just sniffled sadly and leaned against Levi's shoulder with an exhausted exhale.

Something warm bloomed inside Levi at Armin's action, but he decided to shrug it away, thinking it must be because of the cold.

"Where are we going?" Armin asked after some time, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"To your new room. I had cleared it out for you and the other brats," Levi replied. His tone was not perse harsh, but not very soft either.

"Will Eren and Mikasa come too?"

Levi figured that the blond brat was talking about his two annoying companions as he replied, "Yes, they are having their dinner right now, and so will you."

Armin hummed before sagging back into Levi's warmth.

The raven haired man stopped in front of one of the doors that lined up the well lit hallway.

Levi nudged open one of the single wooden doors, revealing a small room within.

The rusty floorboards creaked under the man's weight as he crossed the recently mopped floor towards one of the bunk beds.

"Will Eren and Mikasa sleep there?" The weak child asked, pointing at the bunch bed adjacent to his.

"If you are talking about the other two brats, then yes," Levi replied, not unkindly.

Levi's brows dipped in a small frown as he took out a blanket from the closet near the door.

"This is filthy," Levi said, scrunching up his nose as the grey blanket released a round of dust. Turning to Armin, Levi ordered curtly, "Don't you dare move while I am gone."

Armin could only watch the steel eyed man leave the room, it's not like he had any other option. It hurt to even swallow his own spit. It felt as if millions of nails were clawing inside of his throat.

With a great effort, Armin turned his head towards the large window. The stars looked down at him with pity, making him feel weak and lonely.

The dark room was a little to no comfort. It wasn't warm, nor well lit. The only source of light was the candle Levi had placed on the bedside table before leaving.

Leave. That's what people in Armin's life always did; they left him alone. His parents. his grandpa. He only had Mikasa and Eren with him; for those too, he didn't know when they would both leave him.

The soft creaking of the door broke Armin's depressing train of thoughts that were starting to overwhelm him.

"Armin?" A familiar voice whispered.

Armin turned his head towards the source of the voice; his green-eyed friend was standing near the door with his unnaturally strong ravanette friend right behind him.

"Oh, good, you are awake. We brought some food for you." Eren said, extending the plate of vegetables and bread towards Armin. "You shouldn't sleep without eating anything, especially not in that state."

Armin's blue eyes brimmed with tears, touched by the considerate gesture of his two friends.

"Wah? Why are you crying? Are you hurt?" Eren spoke so quickly that to others, it sounded like a jumbled mesh of words.

Wiping his eyes with the back of his little palm, Armin replied with a smile, "I am alright. I just feel very happy."

The two children helped their sick friend sit up against the pillow before laying down the two plates on his lap.

Armin could feel his throat constricting just by looking at the food. The thought of swallowing the food filled his mind with terror. But what was he supposed to do after such a thoughtful gesture from his friends?

Armin picked up a carrot with a hard resolve; he was going to eat the food for his friends.

The carrot started shaking violently because of Armin's shivering hand before landing on his lap limply.

"Oi," a crossed voice resonated through the small room. "What do you brats think you are doing?"

"L-levi, sir!" Eren shot up from his seat beside Armin, Mikasa following the suit. "W-we were just helping Armin eat. My mother used to say that when someone is sick, eating food makes them healthy again."

Levi sighed tiredly, tossing a peach futon on the bed. "Your mother was right, but your friend here is in no state of swallowing food. That's why—" Levi gently placed the white bowl he was carrying on the table, "—he needs to have something like soup."

"And you both need to finish your food," Levi said, turning to the other two children, who started picking up the plates obediently. "In the dinner hall," he added sternly.

Disappointment was evident on Mikasa and Eren's faces as they both begrudgingly left the room, glancing back at the coughing blond every now and then until they were out of sight.

Armin's displeasure, however, was quickly replaced with awe when he saw the yellow cat imprints on the futon.

Armin reached out his little hand and unfolded the futon, giggling softly as he wrapped it around his head like a veil.

"Do you think you can eat by yourself?" Levi asked, his eyes gazing softly at the little child.

Armin parted his lips to say something but was cut off by his own sneeze.

Levi could feel his eye twitching as the brat tried to sniff the snot back that hung like a teardrop from his nose. In Levi's eyes, children were absolutely unhygienic and disgusting; Eren, Mikasa, and Armin had proved that. But if these three brats were going to live with him, they needed to learn how to stay clean.

After giving a ten-minute lecture on hygiene and wiping the brat's face harshly with a handkerchief, Levi opted to feed the boy himself.

"It's very tasty," Armin said as Levi shoved another spoonful of soup in the little boy's mouth.

"Don't speak with food in your mouth," Levi scolded as he wiped the thin streaks of soup that were trailing down the side of Armin's mouth. "It's bad manners."

Armin nodded enthusiastically before turning to look out of the window.

"Look at that, Captain Levi!" Armin shook Levi's sleeve excitedly as he pointed at a little light sitting on the window pane. "A firefly."

Levi gently scolded the blue-eyed kid before bringing another spoonful of soup to Armin's mouth.

"You suddenly look much better."

"It's because Mikasa and Eren visited me. Now I don't feel sick anymore!" Armin replied as he waved his arms happily before wincing and retracting them back into the futon. "Maybe a little bit."

"You are still burning up," Levi said as he pressed his calloused hands against Armin's forehead. "You should go to sleep, or else you will not be able to leave the bed anytime soon."

Armin quickly tucked himself in as soon as Levi finished feeding him. The said man quickly gathered the cutlery and strode towards the door with a quick goodnight to the sick blonde.

"Thank you, sir," Armin called out, causing the raven-haired man to stop. "Even though we caused you so much trouble, you still took care of me."

Levi was taken aback by Armin's statement. It wasn't the first time he had heard gratitude like this, but yet these words coming from Armin's mouth surprised him.

With a hesitant nod, Levi turned around.

"No need to call me 'sir',' Levi said as looked at Armin from with an expressionless face. "Call me just Levi. Let your friends know this as well."

With the brief command, the man walked out of the room hurriedly and for the first time in weeks, Levi felt the immense urge to relax.

Chapter 4

The sunlight snuck in through the little space between the curtains, falling directly on Levi's eyes.

The raven-haired captain scrunched his face and turned to his side, his back facing the window instead.

The warmth of the blanket started cradling Levi into slumber, and for the briefest moment, everything felt right in the world. That was until a loud knock rapped on his door, pulling Levi harshly back to reality.

"Captain!" A familiar, loud, obnoxious voice of a seven-year-old called from the other side. "We are ready to start training!'

Another voice spoke to the former, hushed but not quite enough for Levi's trained ears to not hear it.

"Eren, are you sure he is still sleeping? I mean the captain never sleeps in."

"I didn't see him for breakfast this morning so he must be in there," The obnoxious voice replied.

Levi wanted to scream and tear the room apart. First, they want him to babysit them throughout the day, leaving him no time for paperwork except for nighttime, and now they want him to train them. How was he even supposed to function after no sleep?

"He promised...he needs to do it," a softer voice spoke next, only snippets of her sentences audible to the irritated captain. Levi could tell from the monotonous tone that it was that girl.

Before Armin could reply, the door to Levi's room flung open, revealing a very angry captain with bed-head.

"You three brats," he spat angrily before narrowing his eyes at the green-eyed boy who was staring at him with wide eyes. The latter's right hand was curled in a fist which was halfway raised, as if he was about to knock.

Eren realized that the man was looking at his raised fist and quickly hid it behind his back.

"And you," Levi's snarl made Eren flinch, the latter's face became pale with fear.

"You annoying brat."

Levi pulled Eren up by the collar, glaring at the little seven-year-old who gulped in fear. Eren could see Levi's bloodshot eyes clearly upon closer look, making the man look more scary. "I have had enough of your obnoxious voice,"

Levi could feel the girl's gaze tearing into his back, but he ignored her. These three children had pushed him to the brink of his sanity in one week!

"I spend the whole morning cleaning after your mess and then I am not even allowed to get some time for myself? I have had enough! Do you want to train, brat? First, learn to clean after your mess."

"We are sorry, Levi," the blond brat, Armin, if Levi remembered correctly, said with an apologetic bow. "We promise to not disturb you again."

Levi narrowed his eyes at Armin before turning back to brat one who opened his mouth to say something but decided against it.

"You want to train, brat?" Levi said in a low dangerous tone as he put Eren down. "Then first show me you are worth it. Clean the dishes, and the windows, mop the floor, dust the shelves and keep this $@#* place clean! Got it?"

Armin and Brat one nodded their heads simultaneously, eyes brimmed with tears. While the girl glared at Levi as if she was ready to kill him, but the said man was too exhausted to care about that.

After one last glare, the raven-haired captain slammed the door closed, making Eren and Armin flinch.

That was the day when Mikasa decided to show Levi that they were worth more than what he thought they were.

Levi felt even worse after the sleep. Not only had he missed breakfast but lunch too! The captain cursed himself over and over again for sleeping till noon.

After changing into his uniform, Levi left for the office, determined to finish the paperwork early so the restlessness he felt wouldn't be repeated in the future.

In his hurry, the grumpy man failed to notice the gleaming glass panes of the windows that were lined in the walls to his right.

The day bled into night, and the stars took their places in the vast night sky, looking down at the raven-haired man from the window of his little office.

Levi sighed loudly as he signed the last paperwork. He couldn't wait for Erwin to get back and take over. This work required patience, something Levi was drained of after taking care of the brats.

Levi tossed the last paper onto the pile of other paperwork and got up to make himself a cup of some well-deserved tea. After all, he hadn't eaten anything ever since he woke up.

The hallways were dim, curtains were drawn and darkness of night had taken over the headquarters. Silence echoed in every corner, not even a mouse stirring; it was just what Levi liked, except for the darkness part.

After living in the underground for almost half of his life, Levi knew the feeling of yearning for the sunlight, to see the birds soaring in the light blue sky, and the greenery the covered every inch of the land.

He appreciated day more than night, even though night was a time of tranquility when humans and titans alike would rest.

But tonight, however, something was different. Levi noticed that not even a single speck of dust covered the furniture. The floor was covered in a layer of sheen, reflecting everything above like a mirror. The windows, clean enough to fool people into thinking that there were no windows at all.

Levi inspected everything, amazement and mild glee dancing in his cold, steel-like eyes. He knew only three brats who could have done this, and Levi was striding toward their room at the moment.

The door creaked softly as Levi entered the little room. His eyes softened as he gazed tenderly at the sleeping figures of the children.

Armin had the peach futon tucked under his chin, his hair untidy and a small smile on his face. The little boy had become rather fond of the futon, carrying the peach thing almost everywhere he went. Levi made a mental note to wash that futon the next day.

On the upper bed slept Eren, and unlike Armin he was sprawled all over the bed, drool trailing down his chin while his mouth wide open. His blanket was kicked to the edge of the bed.

Levi tip-toed towards the boys' bunker bed and carefully covered Eren with the grey blanket, shaking his head in disappointment, but the small smile on his face gave away the fondness he had for these kids.

The raven-haired man turned towards the other bunker bed across from where he stood, but to his surprise, he did not see the sleeping figure of the emotionless girl; the bed was empty.

As if on cue, a muffled thump reached Levi's ears and the raven-haired man quickly exited the room, rushing down the hall where he guessed the source of the thump was.

A fainter thud came from behind a double door, across from Eld's room.

A frown took over Levi's features as he neared the library doors, wondering what could someone be doing in the library at this time.

The scene inside the library took the captain by surprise— books littering the floor, a plate of untouched dinner on the table near an armchair and in the center of it all sat the little

ravenette cross-legged, a book about ODM gear and sword fighting techniques in her little hands.

"Oi, what do you think you are doing at this time?" Levi said, closing the door gently behind him.

"Reading," brat three replied, her eyes not leaving the book even for a second.

"You can read?"

"I had literature and language classes in school."

"Then you must be a master at reading," Levi said as he lazily dropped himself on the armchair. "Especially if you can read it upside down."

Pink dusted Mikasa's cheeks as she quickly turned the book so it was facing correctly. No wonder the words seemed so foreign to her before.

Levi tsked in mock disapproval to hide the small smile that tugged at his lips.

"What is this?" Levi asked, eyeing the bread roll and vegetables that occupied the white plate. "You shouldn't leave your dinner like this, there are people out there who will die for this. Finish it."

"I am not hungry," brat three replied, burying her face further in the book.

Levi got up and walked towards the ravenette, prying the book out of her hand.

"I did not ask. Finish. Your. Food. Now!"

The girl just stared at Levi, the mild fear in her eyes betraying her blank face.

"I will eat when you do," she said at last, picking up another book from the pile around her. "I am not starving to death anyway."

Mikasa had hit the raw nerve with her attitude, and she was well aware of it. So, when Levi forcefully picked her up and set her on the couch, she wasn't surprised.

"Can you eat your food yourself or do you want me to do that for you too?" Levi said, glaring at the little girl.

"Here," the ravenette said instead, ignoring Levi's comment as she shoved half of her bread roll in Levi's mouth. "Eat."

The captain was too exhausted to reprimand or decline the girl, especially when he could feel the tornado of hunger in his stomach.

"Why are you like this?" Levi muttered, rubbing his temple tiredly.

"Because you made Eren and Armin sad," Mikasa replied. "We spent the whole day cleaning the HQ and you never came to even acknowledge our work."

Levi started with a sigh, "I am sorry for lashing out at you three this morning. Brat one was acting more bratty than usual and I hadn't gotten a blink of sleep last night."

"You could have just asked us to go away instead of crushing Eren's dream like that."

"Your fragile bodies are not made for the scouts."

"You can't judge us by our looks."

"I can and I am," Levi snapped. "Brats like you three can't survive a minute out there. People like you three are more better for working on farms or selling stuff on the streets instead. The sooner you accept that the better."

Mikasa got up from the chair furiously, glaring at the raven-haired man. "We are worth more than you think and we can prove it to you!"

"Ugh, shut up Olou or you will bite your tongue and die," a sleepy voice of Eld from the room across said. The half-asleep man was completely unaware of the argument taking place in the library, mistaking it for one of his comrades shenanigans.

Silence settled in the library once again. The two occupants of the room glared at each other ceaselessly until Levi let out a sigh, something he had been doing more and more ever since he started taking care of the children.

The captain got up wordlessly and strode to the door before stopping midway and glancing back at the girl, an action the children had come to learn as Levi's way of telling them to follow him.

After a quick pitstop at the kitchen for tea, the two Ackerman were off to the training ground behind the HQ.

"Here," Levi passed the eight-year-old a spear-like stick. "Use the stick to cut the back of Titan's neck up there," Levi explained, pointing at the cardboard cutout of a titan that hung from a pole.

Mikasa stared at the stick in her hand and then at the titan cut-out that hung twenty feet above the ground, nodding hesitantly.

Levi took a seat on a discarded folding chair near a tree, watching as the girl tried and failed to reach the cutout.

As minutes ticked by, the eight-year-old's frustration only grew. No matter how high she jumped, she wouldn't be able to reach the cardboard. It annoyed her even more when Levi yawned as if mocking her. But Mikasa was not giving up easily. She would prove to him that she could do more than he thinks even if it's the last thing she ever does.

Levi on the other hand, kept a close eye on the pocket watch in his hand, waiting for the time when he could crawl back into the warmth of his blanket. It's funny how he used to feel bored because because of staying at HQ almost a week ago, and now he barely got time to even breathe properly.

Levi got up from the chair when the hour arm struck ten, deciding to call it a day but stopped when he saw Mikasa running towards the cardboard cutout at a very inhuman speed.

The stick was clutched in her little hands like a spear as she used the wall of the castle at the side to increase her jump. The ravenette angled the stick as she bounced off the wall towards the cutout before completely detaching the head from the body.

Levi's bored expression rarely left his face, no matter what anyone did. So it was a very rare site indeed to see the young captain staring at the little girl as if she had grown another head.

After a few seconds of silence, Levi had strode into the weaponry and brought more cutouts, hanging them at different heights.

"Do it again," he said to which Mikasa obliged.

Her tries weren't perfect, sometimes she cut the titan's cutout perfectly while other times she could barely reach the titan. It was times like the latter when Levi would step in, instructing her on different things that could help Mikasa reach her goal.

Levi also taught her a technique through which she used her speed in such a way that people could mistake her for the trick of light.

"Okay, that's enough for today," Levi said finally, tossing the stick back into the weaponry. "We can continue tomorrow, but right now you need to sleep brat."

"Mikasa," the ravenette whispered, bringing the red scarf over her nose.

"I can't hear you. Speak louder."

"My name is Mikasa," the girl repeated a little louder, her face pink from embarrassment.

Levi had to hide his smile with his knuckles before he replied, "Okay, Mikasa. Let's go back inside."

After leaving Mikasa at her room's door, Levi hurried to his own, not wanting to lose a minute of his precious sleep, all whilst reminding himself of the two people he had come to learn about—Mikasa and Armin.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Levi will be using Mikasa's and Armin's name in this chapter, sometimes calling Mikasa cold brat, but just to let you all know that 'brat' is for now reserved only for Eren. This is because unlike Mikasa and Arrrrmin, Levi hadn't really had an Eren-Levi centric chapter YET. That's all for now. Enjoy~

White covered as far as an eye could see. The humanity inside the walls prepared for the winter celebration, singing and dancing with joy and cheer everywhere they went. It was such a peaceful day—

"YOU LITTLE BRATS!"

—Well, for the people outside the scouts HQ at least.

Inside the stone castle raged a war; milk was spilled and futons were (temporarily) left ownerless as a tornado of three mischievous children turned the headquarters upside down.

The other four occupants of the room— Eld, Petra, Gunther and Oluo could only watch in horror as the world's strongest man, and presumably their breakfast's savior, chased the problem as if he was chasing an abnormal Titan.

"YOU THREE ARE IN SO MUCH TROUBLE!" Levi yelled as he caught up with the three culprits behind the spilled milk.

"Aaaaaa," Armin shouted as Levi swooped the little blond into his arms before catching up with Mikasa and Eren, caging them in his arms as well.

The three children thrashed helplessly, while Eren screamed at the top of his lungs, "It was an accident and I promise to clean it up!"

"This mess wouldn't have had happened in the first place if you three didn't fight over a piece of—" Levi glanced at the charred banana bread on the table, "—whatever unedible thing that is. Who even made that thing?"

"Come on Levi," Hange said as she stepped out of the kitchen, wiping smoke off her glasses with a piece of cloth. "That 'thing' is called banana bread, made with love and care, and gooey bananas—"

"You are banned from using the kitchen because not only are you a fire hazard, but a food hazard in general," Levi said then glared at the three children on his lap. "We can't have these brats getting food poisoning."

Hange just hummed before adding with a grin, "Yeah, or else their dad is going to go on a killing rampage, won't he?"

Levi only scowled in reply before getting up and returning to his breakfast, ordering the kids to do the same. The latter three were invited back to the table with comforting words and pats from the Levi squad as if they had just gone through a terrible loss.

What the Levi squad didn't know was that Eren, Armin and Mikasa had gone through Levi's even worse temper.

"I could hear you five all the way from the gate," Erwin said as he strode into the hall, a smile dancing on his lips. "And Levi is right. We don't want the military police getting another reason to ban the scouts right after we just got the permission to continue our missions."

Levi agreed with Erwin's statement wholeheartedly. The military police had the audacity to take the mundane activities of the scouts as a reason to ban them, and the brats might only get added to the long list.

Well, it wasn't Levi's fault that he got caught up in the children's mess. Erwin and Hange had left him behind at HQ with nothing to do, taking Gunther as his replacement instead, and it had irked him to the core.

"Besides, they are also part of scouts, aren't you, soldiers?" Hange added as she joined the rest for breakfast.

"Yes ma'am!" Eren replied loudly with a salute, Armin and Mikasa following his suit.

Levi rolled his eyes at the children, pretending to be annoyed by their action when it was actually the opposite.

Something bittersweet bubbled inside him at the thought of the three brats fighting titans outside the walls. It filled him with pride, yet infinite worry.

"Alright that's enough," Levi said at last. "Finish your breakfast quickly before we go out."

Eren looked at Levi with his doe-like green eyes, "But, we don't have school today!"

"Who said I was going to take you to school?"

Armin jumped excitedly, letting out a happy giggle at the thought of an outing.

"Are we going to the park?" He asked, crawling onto a chair beside the captain.

"Maybe, but there are more fun places out there, other than parks," Levi replied, sipping his tea.

"What is more fun than park?" Mikasa asked, popping her head in front of Levi's face to get the latter's attention.

"Literally anything," the grey-eyed man replied as gently pushed Mikasa away.

"What is that 'anything'?" Eren asked, as he too popped his head in front of Levi's face.

Levi could feel the headache coming back—the one he always got when the brats would do something to get on his nerves.

He was never used to speaking more than two words to people, let alone answering questions. Yet, here he was, answering these three idiots' millions of pointless questions.

"Hmm, an opera, maybe?" Hange said as she bit into her toast.

"That sounds boring."

Hange didn't find Mikasa's reply rude as she chuckled before ruffling the little ravenette's hair fondly.

Levi couldn't help but notice how Hange and Erwin had taken a quick liking to the three new additions to the scouts. Levi would go as far as to say that they might be even subtly pampering the three, even though it had been merely a week since the two returned.

After finishing their breakfast, Levi dressed the children for the cold weather outside.

He would scold the three mischievous children (mostly Eren) every now and then to stand still while he helped them get ready.

"Armin, you are wearing the wrong coat. You are too short to fit that."

"Mind making my life easier by sitting down for a second, brat?"

"That worn-out scarf is not good enough for the weather outside, Mikasa. You need to change it—hey, I saw that eye roll! I am talking to you cold brat!"

"No, there are no ice caves out there, Armin— oi, You little green-eyed idiot! How many times have I told you not to jump on the cushions— WATCH WHERE YOU ARE GOIN—" a loud crash resonated through the hallway, followed by Levi's shout, "I CAN'T EVEN WEAR MY COAT IN PEACE NOW!"

And that, my dear readers, was just a glimpse of our four protagonists' lives at the scouts HQ.

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"It's too cramped with all three of us holding your hand," Eren said, referring to himself and his friends. "I like free space—"

"You can hold Levi's hand and I can hold yours, Ereh," Mikasa said as she stepped aside for Eren, waving him over with one hand while her other clutched the worn-out red scarf tightly. It took negotiations, threats and a million promises of doing extra dishes from Mikasa to be allowed to keep her beloved scarf.

"Trust me brat, I hate holding hands as much as you do," Levi said as Eren's little hand curled around his big one begrudgingly. "But I don't want to go through the headache of getting you three back if any of you got lost."

The little group of four weaved their way through the crowd, stopping now and then to watch shows or to eat something from the booths.

At one point, Levi had to physically carry The children away from a puppet show before they could rewatch it for the fourth time.

Later on, he had to hold Armin on his shoulder because the latter was too short to be able to watch the play from the back.

He once also had to calm Mikasa down after a person with a reflecting mask tried to get her to participate in his hypnotizing show. Levi couldn't understand her fear of hypnotists until Mikasa mentioned something about a nightmare in her crying fit.

But, throughout the day, Levi did not encounter any Eren-specific problems like he was initially expecting. To say that Levi found this rather odd would be an understatement. In his mind, this was an indication of an upcoming storm—an Eren-related storm to be more specific.

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"...and guess what he said."

"What?" Mikasa asked monotonously as she took a bite out of her blueberry pie. Despite the ravenette's inscrutable expression, Levi could sense her disinterest in conversation, or Eren's rant to be more honest.

"He said—If I look like a horse, then the horses must be handsome!" Eren exclaimed, waving his arms around as if he had just revealed an earth-shattering truth.

"Eren, this is the third time you are telling us about this incident," Armin said with a small yawn. "Can we talk about something else instead?"

"Well, another day he tried throwing a hat—"

"We know Eren, we were there with you," Armin said with an exaggerated sigh as he propped his chin in his hands.

"Okay brats," Levi said as he leaned his elbows on the table. "If you three are done talking about this Jean brat, then may we move on to the important stuff?"

The three children nodded simultaneously, a confused expression on each of their faces.

"As you three know, I will be returning to my missions outside the walls in two days, and the missions can range from days to even weeks! Everyone will be leaving for the missions— Eld, Gunther, Oluo, Petra, Hange and of course Erwin too."

Levi stopped to look at the three children, making sure they were paying attention to what he was saying. Eren and Armin gave a hesitant nod to let Levi know they were listening while Mikasa returned to stabbing her pie with her fork.

"No one would be at the HQ to look after you three. It's not like we don't want to, some of us would be more than glad to stay behind, but or job doesn't allow that. I believe you three are aware of that?"

Levi received another hesitant nod from Armin and Eren.

"Mikasa," Levi called out in a warning tone, "stop stabbing your pie with that filthy fork and listen to me first. This is important."

Mikasa did as she was told, shifting in her seat so she was facing Levi, her cold grey eyes staring at the latter with little interest.

"Let me cut this short; you three brats will be alone at the HQ," Levi said impatiently. "And the military police is keeping a close eye on the scouts for lots of reasons. I do not want to hear you three causing any trouble at the HQ while I am gone. It has taken us more than a month to get scouts back in business and I don't want all that go to waste because of three brats, understand?"

The three children nodded again which filled Levi with relief. It wasn't that their nods affirmed that these three would keep out of trouble during his absence, but rather that these three paid attention to what he had said. Hopefully, something went in their bratty brains for now.

Loud shouts drew the four's attention towards the waving brunette from across the booth they were sitting at. The children were more than delighted to learn that Hange was joining them, as for Levi, he was expecting chaos as now he had not one, but two crazy brunettes to look after.

But surprisingly, nothing very chaotic took place. No explosions happened because of Hange's experimental equipment she had brought for testing out in the fair (for some reason). No one almost died because of choking on food. No one got almost kidnapped. No one got lost. For the captain—and Levi found this hard to believe— the rest of the day passed by in a blissful blur. All Levi did was get dragged around the fair by three children with a crazy scientist in the lead.

That night, after the 'brats' were asleep, Levi spent his whole night noting down scenarios that could get the brats in trouble during his absence. When he was on the verge of falling asleep, all he could do was hope to get enough time the next day so he could find ways that may prevent the scenarios from becoming true.

Chapter 6

Cold breeze gently blew through the training ground behind the scouts HQ. Birds sung their melodies as they hopped from branch to branch. The leaves of the trees rustled in perfect synchrony, playing the grand orchestra of nature. Though Eren wasn't interested in any of that at the moment.

The little brown-haired boy was brooding over the recent behaviour of people around him. Since yesterday, everyone has been acting weird, as if they all knew a secret and were keeping it from Eren.

Levi had, for no specific reason, temporarily banned Eren from using specific rooms. It irked Eren even more when he saw Armin and Mikasa going into those rooms like usual.

Mikasa and Armin would disappear off to someplace where Eren wouldn't be allowed to go, leaving the seven-year-old alone with nothing but boredom.

The little boy plucked a small white wild daisy, twirling it in his hand as he tried to remember anything that could help him figure out the reason behind this strange behavior. Is it because he is mischievous? Eren didn't want to cause any trouble; it would just happen. Maybe that's why Levi still didn't call Eren by his name while he used Mikasa and Armin's names just fine.

Eren concluded that must be it! It had been four months since the three children had moved to the HQ, and it would be five after two more days. Anyone would warm up to new additions after this long time, right? Eren couldn't think of any other reason to justify why Levi still called Eren 'brat', and acted a little more distantly with him than compared to Armin and Mikasa.

Now Eren was determined to do something that would bring Levi and Eren closer, but what? Cleaning would be a good option, but Eren and his friends already clean the HQ every day, to the point that you can see sparkles everywhere inside! So he couldn't do a better job than that alone.

Cooking was a no-go, as Levi would probably have him hanged for just touching 'Levi's' cooking utensils.

What about a surprise? Eren remembered the smile Levi had given when everyone surprised him on his birthday and how Levi had surprised Armin and Mikasa on their birthdays. A surprise always managed to raise his spirits, so that's what Eren decided to give Levi.

Eren quickly got up from the ground with a grin before he stopped in his steps, and his expression fell back to a frown.

Eren was planning on asking Petra's help for the surprise, but she had been quite busy in the kitchen today, and Levi had banned Eren from entering the kitchen until the next day.

The little brown-haired boy knew that if he were to go to the kitchen now, he would be caught by Levi and be thrown back out.

Mikasa and Armin were helping Gunther and Eld with something in the hall, so he couldn't ask for their help either without risking being thrown outside again by the two adults.

Eren racked his brain for anything that could help him, but all he could remember was what Levi had said to him.

"Your task for today is to train by yourself." Levi's words rang in Eren's ears. "You are not allowed to come back in until I tell you to, and no, this is not a punishment. Also, make sure that you don't go near Hange's lab; four eyes is doing some dangerous experiments in there."

Well, Levi had been ordering Eren to not enter harmless rooms, so Eren thought that Hange's lab must be like one of those rooms. After all, he, Mikasa, and Armin had been assisting Hange in her lab almost every day before the scouts recent expedition.

Though the dense child overlooked the fact that Levi and all the other adults had been reminding the three children to stay away from the lab ever since the scouts returned a week ago.

Eren decided to ignore the unsettling feeling in his gut and go talk to Hange at her lab. She wouldn't throw him out like Levi, and she would probably help him too. Also, there won't be any Levi guarding the lab anyway.

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The door to Hange's lab squeaked eerily as Eren slowly slipped inside. The green-eyed boy had taken another route to Hange's lab, which was from outside the HQ, but that doesn't guarantee that others inside the HQ won't hear him if he were to make a loud noise.

"Hange san?"

No reply came, no excited thumping of feet could be heard, and no objects were knocked down because of surprise. It was complete silence.

"Hange san?" Eren called out again, a little louder, but yet again, no reply came.

Figuring that the brunette must not be in the lab, Eren decided to wait for her near the desk. But the little boy failed to notice the large shadow following him as he ventured deeper into the lab.

The desk, like usual, was littered with paper and ink. Levi hated coming to Hange's lab just because of how untidy she kept it, but Eren knew that Levi enjoyed Hange's company just like Eren did with his friends.

After crawling onto a chair, Eren peered at the papers littered on the table. He was very curious about what scouts do when they were not on missions, apart from their mundane

activities. He had heard Levi and others talk about planning, meetings, and paperwork, but he never had the chance to actually see them do those things.

The curious boy tried to read Hange's handwriting, but neither Eren's reading skills were strong enough nor was Hange's handwriting neat enough to be read.

A loud thud broke the eerie silence of the lab, forcing Eren to shift his attention towards the source, but once he did, the little boy's blood ran cold.

Near a fallen barrel stood a two-meter-tall titan, its back hunched and the top of its head barely touching the roof.

Eren despised titans and wanted to eradicate every single one of those monsters, but this one in particular had Eren frozen to his spot.

The titan looked quite similar to the one that had devoured Eren's beloved mother. Though this titan seemed to be frowning rather than smiling, its hair was longer.

The titan tried to grab Eren, but the little boy doged just in time, rushing towards the metal double doors that connected the lab to the rest of the HQ. But, alas, the doors didn't budge.

Hange must've locked the huge double doors in fear of the titan escaping the lab. The back door that Eren had used to get inside was smaller—big enough for an average-height person to use but small for the Titans. However, that door was also blocked by the Titan.

Eren started hyperventilating. He couldn't think of anything to help himself. What was a seven-year-old to do when faced with a titan?

The said titan stretched its arms again to catch Eren; the latter stuck between the metal doors and his predator, so the boy did what came to his mind first; he ran side to side in the small area he was trapped in, hoping to confuse the titan, but his efforts were futile.

Eren had managed to get his hands on the letter opener when he had fled the desk, so when the titan picked up the little boy, Eren stabbed the letter opener in its hand. But, no matter how many times Eren stabbed the titan's hand, it still proceeded to bring Eren towards its mouth. The scene of Carla being devoured by the smiling titan replayed in Eren's head, and the boy felt paralyzed for a moment.

'Fight,' a masculine voice whispered, though Eren was quite aware that it was his own mind talking to him. But to whom did the voice belong? Eren had no idea.

The green-eyed boy was only inches away from the titan's wide, open mouth when anger took over his foggy mind, and he screamed with fury in his eyes.

Eren raised his clean little hands to the titan's eye before impaling the letter opener in the titan's pupil. Warm, red liquid trailed down his hand to his elbows as Eren screamed louder in anger and stabbed the titan's eye again.

"DIE YOU, MONSTER!" Eren screamed at the titan as he pushed the letter opener deeper into the titan's eye, hot tears streaming down the little boy's face.

The titan howled in response but did not let go of Eren. The latter was soaked in the titans blood, but he did not care. The worst that could happen was getting punished by Levi for soiling his clothes, but if he did not find a way to save himself, it would truly be the dead end for him.

'You must fight. If you win, you live. If you loose, you die. If you don't fight, you can't win!' The voice whispered again, which filled Eren with rage he had never felt before.

If Eren was in his right mind at the moment, he would have found the voice scary. He would also have noticed the patter of footsteps outside the door and the clinking of metal as someone tried to unlock the door. But Eren was too focused on the titan, on the way the blood oozed out of the titan's eye and soaked his hand with unnatural warmth. The titan's howls filled him with satisfaction, but he craved more.

"I will annihilate every single one of you." Eren wasn't sure if he had said that or the voice in his mind; he wasn't even listening to himself to know what he said, but he was suddenly filled with sadness and loss at those words.

The metal double doors suddenly flew open, revealing a panting Hange with the lock's key in her hand and an angry Levi who was glaring daggers at the titan, or Eren; it was hard to tell.

Everyone had gone still for a moment when Eren's angry screams echoed through the hallways. The screams were faint but loud enough for the trained soldiers to hear. Levi had known then and there that Eren had gotten himself in trouble again, but this time with the titan that was locked in Hange's lab.

"Eren!" Hange shouted in worry.

Levi, on the other hand, rushed towards the titan at his inhumane Ackerman speed. In a matter of seconds, Levi had the titan on the floor, its nape cut open, and a stunned Eren back in his arms.

No one said anything for some time, not even Hange, with whom silence never lasted for more than a second.

"You are never bringing a titan inside for experiment Hange," Levi said, his eyes trained on the titan's evaporating corpse. "Never again."

Hange nodded in reply, gazing at the shaken little boy with pity.

"And you," Levi said, turning his head toward Eren angrily. "What do you think you were doing at the lab? Didn't I tell you to stay away from this place?"

Eren went stiff before nodding slowly, his eyes downcast in shame.

"I am sorry, Levi."

Levi's gaze softened at Eren's low voice. He had never heard the energetic kid speak in such a way.

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Everyone was crowding at the staircase that led from the lab to the rest of the HQ, and when Levi emerged with Eren, everyone was fretting over the little boy.

"Eren, did the titan hurt you?" Mikasa asked worriedly, eying the blood on both Levi and Eren's clothes.

Eren replied with a shake of his head, "No, Levi saved me."

The said man had ordered everyone to hold Mikasa and Armin back while he went to help Eren, or else the two children would have followed him to the lab despite his protests and reprimands.

After changing himself out of his blood-stained clothes and giving Eren a bath, Levi left the little boy with Armin and Mikasa to get some paperwork done. Levi didn't want to leave Eren, not after such a traumatizing experience, but he hadn't done any work since the morning as he was preoccupied with Eren's birthday party preparations for the next day.

Levi blamed himself for what had happened; he was well aware of how bad Eren was at following orders, unlike Mikasa and Armin. He shouldn't have left Eren on his own like that.

"It's okay, Levi. I have seen worse." Levi remembered what Eren said to him before he had left the children's room. "You should go do your paperwork. I will be alright."

Levi didn't need to be a genius to understand what Eren meant by that; the three children must've been one of the refugees from Wall Maria.

Levi had never cared to ask the children about their past because he always assumed that they grew up in the orphanage and left it later, when they were capable of escaping, like the majority of orphans inside the walls. But he never thought that they were from the wall Maria.

The captain stopped walking for a second as something crossed his mind. Eren, Armin, and Mikasa became orphans after the fall of Wall Maria, which means they lost their families to the titans!

Levi could feel his heart getting heavier with each realization. He regretted every rude thing he had said to the kids.

That night, after dinner, Petra helped Levi wash the dishes. Usually it would be the children helping Levi, but today he sent them to bed early after dinner. He knew Eren needed sleep more than anything after the event that had happened.

"I talked with Eren," Petra said as she handed Levi another dirty dish. "I know why he went to the lab."

"He thought that you were upset with him, and he wanted to make it up to you. Eren wasn't allowed to come into the HQ while we prepared for his birthday, so he couldn't ask for our advice. That's why he went to ask Hange's help instead."

Levi felt warm after Petra's explanation, a feeling he had gotten used to after adopting the three brats.

As the steel-eyed man gazed at the moon from the window, he realized that no one had ever cared or thought about him the way these three children do. But his train of thoughts were interrupted when Armin ran into the kitchen.

"Levi!" Armin said urgently, tugging at the older man's apron. "It's Eren!"

Before Armin could elaborate, Eren's loud cries filled the halls.

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"Eren," Mikasa's distressed voice greeted Levi as he entered the room.

The ravenette was shaking Eren's shoulder to awaken him, while the latter was screaming in agony.

Levi rushed to Eren, gently removing Mikasa's hand as he tried to pick up the little brown-haired boy.

Eren responded with a louder scream and clutched the bed sheets tightly, his hands and legs going stiff.

"Eren," Mikasa cried, while Armin held her back.

"Let Levi handle this," the blond whispered to Mikasa.

At this point, the whole scouts HQ was peaking into the room, watching the scene unfold.

Levi wrapped one of his arms around Eren's head and used his other hand to pry the bed sheets out of the little boy's clutches. Levi was pretty sure he heard a rip of the sheets, but he was too focused on Eren to care.

Eren, on the other hand, was showing no signs of waking up; sleep was pulling the little boy deeper into whatever nightmare he was having.

"Eren," Levi said as he gently patted the boy's left cheek. "Wake up. It's just a nightmare."

After one more pat and a shake, Eren's eyes opened, revealing emerald green brimmed with tears. His eyes spoke of all the fear, all the pain, all the frustration, all the helplessness he had suppressed to be strong for his friends, to look strong and tough.

"L-levi," Eren cried as more tears swelled in his eyes.

Levi was never good with comforting words, so he hugged the green-eyed boy instead, letting the latter cry his eyes out.

"I-I am weak," Eren sobbed. "I couldn't save her."

After Eren's cries subsided into hiccups, he realized all the faces staring at him from the doorway. Some faces he recognized, while others he was completely unfamiliar with.

The little boy buried his face in Levi's shoulder, embarrassed by what the scouts HQ had witnessed.

" 'Kay folks," Hange said to the crowd after sensing Eren's discomfort. "Back to your rooms..." She ordered, waving the crowd away from the room.

As the crowd started to disperse, Olou slowly closed the door behind him, leaving the four occupants of the room in peaceful silence.

"It ate her," Eren hiccuped.

"Who, Eren?" Levi asked softly as he ran a hand through Eren's brown hair.

"My mom."

Levi's hand froze halfway through brushing Eren's hair, and Mikasa's face suddenly fell at Eren's word. She pulled her scarf over her nose to hide her own quivering lips. While Armin just stared at his hands sadly, feeling utterly useless in comforting his friends.

"It looked like the titan today—" Eren bursted into tears again before he could even finish his sentence. "I am so sorry."

Levi could only hug Eren tighter, a feeling of emptiness and grief swelling in his heart as well. The captain knew exactly how it felt to lose someone as beloved as one's mother.

"It's okay, Eren," Levi whispered to the little boy. "It was not your fault."

Soon, two pairs of little arms were wrapped around Eren as well, attempting to comfort the sobbing boy.

Armin said sweet words to his friend in a shaky voice, hoping to calm him down, while Mikasa just gently hugged her friend, unable to form comforting words when she herself was on the verge of crying.

Levi felt his heart break into a million pieces at the scene, realizing how much the three had gone through, and before he knew it, Levi had his arms around all three little children. He was silently giving them a promise of peace, a promise of hope, a promise of home.

The warmth of Levi's embrace lulled the children to sleep, while the strong man kept watch over them in the darkness of the room.

He stared outside the window, at the stars that decorated the vast sky, something he couldn't have done if he were still underground. It was something the children couldn't have done either if they were sent underground as well.

Recently, the military police had been sending orphans to the underground because the orphanages were closing their doors increasingly. It made Levi fear that if the military police

used an excuse to take these brats away, then they would be sent to the underground as well. That day, Levi promised himself to protect the children at all costs, no matter what.

Chapter 7

Eren and Armin were ecstatic for the upcoming competition at their school. The two had been gushing on about it during everything they did—eating, walking, working, cleaning. Levi was pretty sure that the whole scouts HQ must know about the upcoming competition at this point.

"It's divided into three categories: literature, science, and mechanics. Students are allowed to participate in only one of these categories," Armin explained, his voice tiny against the hustle and bustle of the mess hall.

"Whoever wins gets a cake and a rosette, and I get to compete against Jean too! That will show him who is the real winner."

Levi was more focused on the porridge that clung to Eren's little mouth as he spoke rather than what Eren had said.

With an irritated huff, Levi roughly wiped the boy's face, scolding the latter for eating like an animal. This had become the captain's routine: cleaning after the children's mess. But it didn't bother him as much as it used to; he would even go as far as to say that he enjoyed caring for the children, but of course he would rather become a titan food instead of admitting that out loud.

Levi was well aware that these were like fleeting moments of happiness before the three brats' will grow up and face the world.

"That sounds interesting," Petra replied with a polite smile, dipping her own spoon in her steaming hot porridge. "So which categories are you both planning on participating in?"

"Literature!" Armin replied excitedly. "They will have a debate competition."

"Science or mechanics, I am still not sure yet," Eren replied.

"And what about you, Mikasa?"

"Whatever Eren chooses," Mikasa replied, her voice so low that she was practically inaudible against the loud chatters of the hall.

"Did I just hear competition and science in one sentence?" Hange's loud voice interrupted the three as she shoved herself between Eren and Levi.

"Oi, what do you think you are doing, four eyes?"

"Couldn't find a seat anywhere else," Hange replied to Levi dismissively before turning to Armin, her brown eyes shining similar to when she would find something new about the Titans to research on. "Tell me more about this competition of yours."

"It's in a month. We have all this time to prepare for it," Armin explained. Even after a year of living with scouts, Armin would still feel a little overwhelmed by Hange's peculiar attitude. But he enjoyed the brunette's company nevertheless.

"And you both are planning on taking science, hmm?" Hange turned to Mikasa, who was sandwiched between the blonde and her green-eyed friend, before turning to Eren. The light reflecting off her glasses gave her an intimidating look, which started the little brown-haired boy.

"Ye-yeah, or mechanics," Eren stuttered.

"If you want, I can help you with that. As you already know, Levi is not really a science or mechanics person."

"Really, you will help us?"

Levi knew from the way Eren's eyes shone that the little brat had already accepted Hange's offer. The grey-eyed man silently sighed against his cup of water; there was no turning back now.

"Levi, I am borrowing these two—"

"I will send them down to your lab after they are done with homework," Levi said, unbothered by all the eyes staring at the group because of Hange's loud voice. He was more busy thinking about how to save the HQ from blowing up when there were three chaotic forces experimenting down in the basement.

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"...Thus, I propose the schedule to be changed for the betterment of our school," Armin finished reading the scribbled words on the paper in his hand before looking up at Levi, who was washing the dishes. The said man just hummed in reply.

After a moment of silence, Armin spoke up, "You are supposed to say something that opposes my statement. I will say it again."

The little blonde repeated his idea that he was going to be presenting during the debate, only to receive an abrupt reply from Levi at the end.

"No."

"I don't think it works th—"

"No."

"You will need to elaborate—"

"No."
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Armin let out a small sigh, his head hung low with defeat. That's why no one could really win against Levi, even when he didn't elaborate his statement; his voice was scary enough. Practicing his debate skills with the captain was surely getting Armin no where; the boy was sure of that.

"See, Armin, if you are looking for someone to practice your debate skill with, I am really not the person you need," Levi said as he set the last dish on the drying rack. "Try asking others around the HQ; someone else might be of more help in this than me."

So off the little blonde went, looking for someone who could help him prepare for his debate.

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"... Schedule to be changed for the betterment of our school," Armin looked up at Petra with his hopeful eyes, hoping she would have some idea that would turn this into a debate.

Petra, on the other hand, hadn't said a word. She had been listening to his idea intently, shaking her head vigorously every now and then in agreement as if this were one of the survey corps meetings.

"I wholeheartedly agree with you, Armin!" Petra exclaimed. "Your school should change the schedule to incorporate more subjects and clubs."

"Do you have anything that could perhaps oppose my idea?"

At that, Petra's smile faltered. "I don't really, but you should try asking others."

Thus, Armin continued his little quest but ended up with no fruitful results. He asked everyone he knew, Gunther, Eld, Olou, even Molbit and Mike, but no one was able to help him practice for his debate. It was to be expected that the scouts were more dominant in physical fights than verbal debates.

Hange could've helped him, but the said woman was helping Mikasa and Eren, so he knew that it was a no-go as well.

These events lead to where Armin was right now, curled in a corner of a hallway, brooding about his upcoming failure if he didn't got any help.

"Armin, what are you doing here?" A masculine voice pulled Armin out of his worrying thoughts, making the blond look up at the owner of the voice, Erwin.

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Erwin patiently listened to the little blond explain the reason behind his worry before offering help.

There are no words to describe the glee that overtook Armin's troubled expression at Erwin's offer. The little blonde had even thrown his arms around Erwin in a grateful hug.

"Thank you so much, sir," Armin sniffled, his hug tightening.

Erwin was slightly taken aback by the abrupt hug, but quickly reciprocated, a small smile tugging at his lips. He still had some paperwork left to do, but he figured that it wouldn't hurt to clear his schedule a bit to help Armin.

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Levi tsked in annoyance at the ticking clock before him. The HQ was unusually silent, with only the tick-tocks of the grandfather clock echoing in the hallways. With no boisterous children currently running or loitering around the HQ, it felt lonely, for Levi at least.

It's only been a day since the brats' started working on their preparations for the competition. Yet Levi was missing them as if they had been gone for months.

The captain felt a little blue at the thought of not being of any help to the brats for the upcoming competition. Instead of him, Erwin and Hange had to help the children. If only the competition was about something else, anything else really; combat, cooking, sports, but no, the competition had to be about two things that he was not strong in.

It was then Levi realized that what he was feeling was not just sadness but some jealousy mixed into it. The children had been depending on him for everything ever since he adopted them a year ago, and Levi had started fancying the feeling of being needed, the feeling of being wanted.

As much as he would hate to admit it, Levi was scared. He was scared that they would leave him if he weren't of their need, just like Kenny.

Levi almost let go of the teacup in his hand when a small explosion from the basement reached his ears. Worse case scenarios were going through the captain's mind as he hurried to the staircase, the liquid sploshing wildly in his tea cup with every step he took.

"Oi," Levi threw open the door to Hange's lab. "What's going on here?"

Green eyes peaked at him from behind a steel barrier, followed by a pair of cold grey eyes and a pair of brown.

Levi glared at the remains of something he couldn't identify due to its burnt state, which were lying in the middle of the lab. He pieced it together, concluding that this must be the source of the explosion.

The steel barrier, what Levi assumed must be to protect the three from the explosion that took place, rattled before falling to the ground with a loud thud, revealing Eren, Mikasa, and Hange, crouching on the ground and managing to look very stupid at the same time.

"Levi!" A very visible bead of sweat trailed down Hange's face as she realized that Levi's glare was directed towards her. "We were just-er-experimenting."

"Did you see that, Levi?" Eren asked ecstatically as he bounced towards Levi. "First it went boom and then bam and then whoosh!" The little boy explained while flailing his arms
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around.

"This is too dangerous," Levi replied with a frown before turning to Hange, "any explosions will result in the participants getting eliminated from the competition. I believe you knew that."

"O-oh, really? I think I missed the elimination part," Hange replied, then added with a grin, "Then we can just make a machine instead. Come on, my little assistants, we have work to do!"

After ensuring that no further explosions would take place during his absence, Levi left for Erwin's lab to check up on Armin.

"...Schedule to be changed for the betterment of our school," Armin's sweet voice greeted Levi as the man stepped into Erwin's office.

"It's good, but I would suggest that it needs stronger words," Erwin replied to the little boy. "Words that would have more impact. Take this for an example—" Erwin paused when he noticed Levi's cold face peering into the room. "Oh Levi, come on in."

The young captain softly shut the door behind him and joined the two blondes.

"How's the debate preparation going?"

"Amazing!" Armin replied, jumping in his seat excitedly.

"It's going pretty well," Erwin replied. "He is a really bright child. We should be done with the debate preparations in no time."

Levi listened to Erwin as the latter praised Armin's skills, pride swelling in him at every praise that left the blonde's lips.

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Every day after dinner, the three children would part. Armin would leave for Erwin's office while Mikasa and Eren would disappear off to Hange's lab, leaving Levi alone with his work.

A month passed by in a blink, and before Levi knew it, he was striding to Hange's lab the day before the competition to see how well the group had progressed.

"You will be our judge!" Eren chirped, gently pushing Levi onto a chair beside Hange. Levi couldn't help but scrunch his face a little in annoyance at Hange's extremely dishevelled state.

"I know Mr. Clean Freak," Hange started with a chuckle as she rolled down her sleeves, which were covered in tar-like substance. "I will get cleaned up after their presentation."

"It's not just you four eyes," Levi replied, not ignoring the fact that he was called 'Mr. Clean Freak' by eyeing Hange as she rubbed a blue stain on her face, only to spread it more. With a small tsk, the man turned to the two children, who also had patches of the dark substance on their clothes. "Cleaning those clothes will be a nightmare for me."

"You know, I had been working on this new detergent, which has this component that is really useful at removing stains. I thought it would be of help after we return from the expeditions..."

Eren cleared his throat, making Hange end her explanation shortly, but as the little green-eyed boy realized all the attention directed at him, he started shifting on his feet uncomfortably before starting the introduction.

During the introduction, Levi was struggling to conceal his smile at Eren's obvious attempt to imitate Erwin, from the serious tone to the furrow of the little boy's eyebrows.

Levi also noticed how Mikasa, a complete contrast to Eren, stood beside the brown-haired boy in silence. The little ravenette had her little hands balled around the cloth that was covering the mechanism, ready for the moment when she would lift the cloth for the grand reveal. All the while her eyes were darting between Eren and the audience of two in anticipation.

Even though the actual reveal wasn't as grand as Levi thought it would be, he still praised the two for their efforts.

"Did you like the introduction I gave, Levi?" Eren asked excitedly to which Levi hummed in agreement.

In truth, Levi was not able to pay any attention to what Eren had said, mostly because of his very distracting seatmate. Hange's excited hooting and applauding every now and then would almost make Levi jump in his seat. Thus, the captain had spent most of the introduction thinking of creative curses he could use on Hange later.

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After the small trip to Hange's lab, Levi, Eren, and Mikasa had made their way to Erwin's office to check up on the little blonde's progress.

However, as soon as Levi opened the door, he was met with strict and very complex-sounding statements being thrown around.

"It feels like I have walked into a courtroom," Mikasa said as she played with her scarf, completely unbothered by the loud voices.

"I agree," Eren piped in as he stared at Erwin and Armin debating with each other.

"This is their way of preparing for the debate," Levi explained as he leaned on the doorway, not bothering to make their presence known to the two debating blondes.

"Good job, Armin," Erwin said at last, offering the said child a glass of water. "There shouldn't be any opposing topics strong enough to bring your idea down."

"T-thank you," Armin squeaked as he shyly accepted the glass of water.
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"Armin against our new survey corps commander, how interesting," Hange whispered, causing Eren to let out a startled scream.

"H-hange San!"

"Oi, four eyes. How many times do I have to tell you to not sneak up on us like that?"

Eren's scream had finally drawn the two blondes's attention to the little audience at the door.

"Levi!" Armin jumped into the older man's arms, despite Levi's protests. "Did you see my debate?"

Armin did not wait for a reply before whipping his head towards his two friends and asking them the same question.

"We did not see the whole thing. So, if you don't mind, may we also have the honour to witness Armin debate against our new survey corps commander?" Levi's monotonous tone made Erwin chuckle. But he couldn't blame Hange and Levi for the teasing. After all, how many commanders before him had set aside their work to help out a second grader with his school competition?

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On the day of the competition, Hange returned to her lab after Levi had taken the children to school. If she were her normal whacky self, she would've started working away on a new experiment as soon as she entered, but that day she decided to wait for Molbit instead.

The truth was, Hange was feeling a little lost. The past expeditions had been nothing but a big fail, and so were her experiments. The government's pressure on the survey corps was only increasing, and the scouts in return were nowhere near to saving humanity from the flesh-eating monstrosities that roamed beyond the walls.

Hange slumped in her seat, her hand clawing at her hair in frustration. She had thought that helping Eren and Mikasa with their project would uplift her spirit, but it only added to the stress.

While Hange was agonizing over the situation the survey corps was in, a slightly crumpled edge of a colourful paper caught her eye.

With a light tug, the brunette managed to pull out the blue dyed paper, which resembled a rosette, from under the discarded pile of machinery.

"Eh?" Her brown eyes widened in surprise before softening as she recognized the creators of the sloppy craft as none other than Eren and Mikasa.

Scribbled on the centre button with a purple crayon were three words, almost unreadable due to the attempt to fit them in the circle: "world's best scientist."

Hange tenderly touched the frills of the rosette, warmth blooming inside her at the warm gesture of the children. She suddenly felt energized; she felt as if she could conquer the

world.

The scientist jumped off her chair, with determination shining in her brown eyes. She wasn't going to lose hope, not when humanity was depending on her.

A little did she know that she wasn't the only one to receive a warm gift. Upstairs, in Erwin's office, the new survey corps commander was working away on his desk with a white paper rosette pinned to his beige coat. On the centre button, scribbled in a neater and more readable handwriting was "World's Best Commander."

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"You three did what I told you to do, right?"

The three children nodded simultaneously to Levi's question, eyes trained on the approaching outline of their school's building.

"Good," Levi had asked the children to make a small thank you gift for Hange and Erwin. The captain found this as an opportunity to teach the brats some manners and also a way to motivate his comrades, who were losing determination because of their snobby government. And it wasn't very hard either because the brats themselves wanted to do something for the people who had helped them with their projects.

To someone else, it may sound weird, but Levi had a feeling that out of everything, a sloppy craft from the three brats was something that would encourage Hange and Erwin the most. He knew this because he himself felt that whenever he received gifts from the brats.

These children were the future of humanity; these children were the hope, the reason behind the survey corps efforts to regain their lost world.

"Take care, you three," Levi said as he ruffled Armin and Eren's hair before bending down to readjust Mikasa's scarf. "You three are going to do great. Just don't freak out, and you should be good."

"It's not me you should be worrying about," Mikasa replied, tilting her chin towards the two boys who stood beside her. Armin was visibly shaking with nervousness, while Eren, despite the desperate attempt to act confident for the competition, his shaky grin gave him away.

After a little more encouragement from Levi, the two boys had calmed down and were skipping into their school with their expressionless ravenette friend in the tow.

Levi wished he could capture that moment in something forever—a proof of his children spreading their wings. He would often wonder when things had changed—when had he taken up the role of a father instead of just a guardian?

He would feel frustrated from time to time at the realization that he had become soft. Levi would question himself about whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that he changed. But, watching his three brats skipping happily with not a care in the world and watching them

flash him those dopey grins that would leave a dimple in their chubby cheeks, Levi was glad that things changed.

Chapter 8

"Faster! Faster!" Eren chanted as Hange ran across the field, the little boy sitting comfortably on the brunette's shoulder as she sped through the tall grass that reached her knees.

Eren could see the tiny figures of Mikasa and Armin getting bigger and bigger as Hange reached closer to the end of the field. He wondered if titans also viewed them like this, just a lot more tinier.

"Now its Armin's turn, then Mikasa," Hange said once she had set Eren down. The said two children were already waiting beside Eren for their turn to ride on Hange's shoulder, their faces bright with excitement.

Hange had finished her work early while Levi had not been able to because of some particular brats. So the brunette had offered to take the three pestering children to the training field behind the HQ while Levi finished his work. Hange loved to spend time with the children, to the point that people said if it weren't for Hange's height, she would have been mistaken for an overly energetic child as well.

"Oi," a familiar emotionless face of the captain came into their view as soon as Hange had picked up Armin. "If you three are done with your Hange ride, then it's time to get you brats cleaned."

Mikasa couldn't help but snicker at the way Levi had said 'Hange ride', as if the three children had been having a horse ride.

"Aww, already? But we just started!" Eren said with a pout.

"Believe me, kid, I hate washing your dirty clothes as much as you three hate taking baths."

Levi paused in his steps before turning around and adding, "And be quick, you three. We have to leave for Mitras before evening."

The school had started a donation campaign for the homeless, orphans, and families in the underground but were faced with the problem of transporting the donations. Wagons couldn't be driven on stairs, which were the only way of reaching the underground and back. Apart from that, navigating through the underground streets and allies was a dangerous task in itself.

Eren, being the idiot he is, had graciously offered to volunteer to transport the donations underground, all the while roping Levi and the other two knuckleheads into the campaign. Levi was obviously not very ecstatic at the idea of returning to the underground even for a few hours, and he definitely wasn't pleased with Eren when the boy had told him that he told the teachers that Levi knew how to navigate the underground.

Levi had made the nine-year-old clean twice as much and made him run laps around the HQ for the coming days.

"Children," Levi tsked as he scrubbed dirt out of Armin's shirt. "They never learn cleanliness —oi! Slow down unless you three want time out."

"Got it!" Armin shouted over his shoulder as he and Eren raced past the squatting captain before being tumbled to the ground by Mikasa.

"Caught you," Mikasa gasped between her giggling fit.

"Don't get your clothes dirty, brats! You three just took a shower," Levi scolded before returning back to aggressively scrubbing the children's dirty clothes.

Soon the game of tag had turned into a game of tag-hide-and-seek, or that's what the brats called it, while Levi was mentally counting every second of his precious time he was wasting hanging up the unreasonable amount of laundry of the three children. In Levi's opinion, the older Armin, Eren, and Mikasa got, the more rowdier they became.

'Who do they think I am, their maid?' Levi thought sourly as he looked at Armin from the corner of his eyes. The said blonde was ducking under a hanging laundry, looking for his two friends who were hiding somewhere amongst the drying clothes.

'Not even a minute passes, and they get themselves dirty again. I am a human, not a washing machine,' Levi thought again as he hung a sheet on the clothesline.

Before the captain could pick up the now empty laundry basket that was discarded at his feet and be on his way, the rustling of the sheets from the other side stopped him.

Suddenly Eren's face appeared from under the sheets with his fingers stretching his mouth at the sides in such a way that made Eren look very very stupid, as Levi would like to put it.

The raven-haired captain's lips tugged upwards in a smile before he bursted out into a soft laugh.

A wave of sadness and nostalgia washed over Eren at Levi's laugh. It reminded the little boy of his beloved mother, who would laugh at his silly antics the same way—his beloved mother, who was now very far away from him all because of the Titans.

Before Eren knew what he was doing, he had his little arms wrapped around Levi's torso in a tight hug.

Levi let out a small, surprised gasp at the abrupt embrace before softly placing his hands on the boy's shoulder. The captain knew from the way Eren froze when he had laughed and the way tears had filled his green eyes that Eren was reminded about something about his past, probably his deceased family if Levi was to guess.

"You will never leave us alone, right, Levi?" Eren asked, his voice muffled by Levi's apron.

"I won't; at least I will try not to," the said man replied, running a hand through Eren's brown locks.

Eren nodded before adding, "I don't want you to ever leave us. Armin and Mikasa too."

"Like I said, I will try not to."

The two stood like that for a moment before Levi gently pushed Eren away.

"Quickly go and finish the game; we have quite a journey ahead of us today."

Just as Levi had finished speaking, Armin and Mikasa emerged from behind a pair of drying laundry before chasing a giggling Eren towards the HQ. But the two stopped midway and shared a look before rushing back to Levi and giving him a quick hug, then returning back to tagging Eren.

Levi, on the other hand, was unfazed by the children's actions and casually picked up the discarded basket before walking back to the HQ. It's something he had come to associate with their friendship; if one were to do something, the others would follow them. This was at times cute, while other times irritating because if one of the three (mostly Eren) would get in trouble, the other two would follow.

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"That's the last one," Levi announced, wiping a bead of sweat off his forehead after placing the last crate on the wagon.

"Now we can be on our way!" Armin and his other two companions cheered as Levi joined the three on the box seat.

"I am still surprised at how all four of you can fit on that seat," Hange mused with a hand on her chin. "Are you sure you don't want any of us to go with you instead, Levi? Besides, we would be able to lift the crates so you won't have to do everything on your own—"

"We can lift the crates too!" Eren protested.

"A-and we can also take care of Levi. We can help him eat this while he is driving so he wouldn't get tired!" Armin said, raising the marmalade-stuffed bread rolls that Petra and Molbit had prepared for their journey. The blond glanced at his expressionless friend who was sitting beside Eren before adding, "Besides, even if Eren and I can't be of a lot of help in lifting the crates, Mikasa can! She is strong enough to lift as many crates as Levi can."

Hange suppressed her laugh at the look Levi casted at the three children who were clinging to him like koalas.

Seated in the centre of the brats—Eren and Mikasa to his left while Armin to his right—Levi knew that he would be having his ears talked off during the journey.

After a round of goodbyes, the horses propelled the wagon forward as Levi adjusted the hold on the reins.

"Hold on tight," Levi spoke to the three children who jerked due to the sudden movement of the wagon. "This is going to be a long and bumpy ride."

Little did the captain know that the journey would be anything but boring.

As the night fell, Levi started growing anxious; the group of four were progressing rather slowly in their journey and were yet to reach Wall Sina. The chitter chatter of the children around him was the only distraction from the anxiety he was feeling ever since he had left the HQ.

Levi wasn't sure if the anxiety was due to their slow journey or the thought of returning to the underground, or maybe even both. But he wasn't going to back down now, nor was he going to regret his decision.

"I spy with my little eye something very big and black with little shiny dots," Eren's voice pulled the captain out of his thoughts.

The three brats were playing something called eye spy, something Eren had come up with when the ride started to become boring. The said boy took a bite out of his bread roll before offering it to Levi, who accepted the offer silently with his eyes never leaving the road.

"I know, the night sky!" Armin replied, pointing at the sky excitedly before offering Levi his own bread roll. This had been going on for quite some time now; the children taking turns in offering Levi a bite out of their food so he wouldn't have to stay hungry because he was driving.

"Are we there yet?" Mikasa asked as she rubbed her eyes tiredly.

"No, not yet."

"Should we stop for the night?" Armin asked with a yawn. "If we are still far from Mitras, then there is no point in staying awake for the night. Besides, we will need our energy when we will be delivering the crates in the underground."

Levi hummed in agreement. Armin had made a strong point, but Levi had also heard that the forest they were driving through housed millions of wild wolves. The captain would rather stay up for the night than take the chance of camping out in the forest with three children. Besides, Levi had stayed up for nights on countless missions, and yet he functioned just fine the next day.

He wasn't surprised when Armin was the first one to fall asleep, leaning on the raven-haired man as his breathing evened out.

"Armin fell asleep, even though we made a plan of staying awake the whole night," Eren said with a pout before uncrossing his arms to stifle a yawn.

"I think we should go to sleep too, Ereh," Mikasa said, her eyes drooping as she leaned back.

"And miss the fun of the ride? No way!"

"We will see about that, brat," Levi mummered with a small smile as he glanced at two sleepy nine-year-olds beside him.

It didn't even take ten minutes for the other two children to fall into slumber as well. Mikasa was using Eren as her cushion while Eren was leaning on Levi just like Armin was on the

other side. The captain sat in the middle, fighting the urge to fall asleep himself. In the end, the sleep won.

Levi wasn't even sure when his eyes had shut close; all he could focus on were the three innocent little warmths that were surrounding him.

It wasn't until the wagon swerved towards the bumpy ground of the forest that all four of the occupants of the wagon awoke with a startle. The crates rattled violently in the back that Armin feared they might crack.

Levi quickly pulled the reins to slow down the horses to a stop before any serious damage could be done.

"Are you three okay?" Levi quickly asked, turning to examine the faces of the three children.

"Wha—what just happened?" Eren asked, blinking as his mind tried to process what had gone down in the last thirty seconds.

The captain didn't realize that he was hyperventilating until he heard Mikasa's voice ask, "Are you okay?"

Levi quickly composed himself before turning to look at Mikasa, "I am fine."

He returned his eyes back to the road before glancing at the map that was spread out on Armin's lap with a contemplative look.

"There is a meadow at the end of the forest that connects to the farmlands of Ehrmich district," Levi said, his hold tightening on the reins. "It would be safer to camp out there for the night, I suppose."

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'Tsk, you are growing weak, Levi. Panicking like that?' Levi scolded himself.

The warm summer breeze entered the little tent through the small opening cracks of the tent door. Being the one who was sleeping closest to the tent door, Levi could confirm that it wasn't a pleasant experience, especially when four people were squeezed into a tent that could barely house two people.

At least Levi didn't had it as bad as Eren. The captain casted a pitiful gaze at the said boy, who was sandwiched between Mikasa and Armin.

Eren was squirming uncomfortably because of the heat, his sleeping bag already discarded at his feet.

"Eren, stop squirming like that," Armin whispered to Eren. "You will wake Mikasa up."

"But I can't sleep," Eren whined softly. "It's like an oven in here!"

"I don't think any of us can sleep, Eren," Levi said, before gesturing towards Mikasa and adding, "even her."

As if on cue, a wolf howled in a distance, causing all three children to snap their heads up in alarm.

"Don't worry, the howl is quite far," Levi said monotonously, his forearm resting over his eyes. "We are a safe distance away from the wolves."

The children relaxed a little, slowly sinking back into their sleeping bags when another abrupt howl made them abandon their sleeping spots completely.

Levi could only let out a yelp as the three children jumped onto him simultaneously in fear. He could feel Mikasa's fingers digging into his arm as the little girl clutched his hand in a death grip, while the two boys were shivering in fear as they clung onto his neck.

"You three," Levi gasped as he held his stomach. Even though Levi was humanity's strongest, the captain was still a human. No Ackerman power could stop the feeling of being hit with a brick in the stomach when three nine-year-olds had jumped onto him.

"This one was closer!" Armin cried, while Eren whimpered in agreement.

"Even if they were outside the tent, they can't come inside. The door is closed," Levi said in a slightly irked tone.

"B-but what if they do-oo?" This time Eren cried.

Levi could only let out an exhausted sigh in reply as he shifted himself so the four would get into a more comfortable position. For sometime there was no sound except of the crickets chirping outside before another howl resonated through the forest; this time it indeed sounded closer.

"D-did you ever feel s-scared, Levi?" Armin asked.

Levi hummed sleepily in reply.

"Was it when you were small, like us?" Eren asked, looking up at Levi with curiosity. The raven-haired man, however, only hummed in reply once again.

"Then what did you do at times like those?" Mikasa asked, her soft voice a small whisper.

Levi thought for a little, trying to remember about his own childhood that was wasted in the underground. Somewhere from the deep buried memories, his mind brought him a hazy memory of his mother humming.

"My mother would hum a song to me."

"Which one?" Armin asked.

"I don't know; I never got to know the name of the song. She passed away before I could ask her."

"Oh," it was a soft, understanding whisper that came from all three children snuggled against the captain.

Sleep was slowly taking over Levi's consciousness. The captain was slightly unaware of the words that left his mouth, but he continued answering the children's questions anyway, taking the three on a journey of his past.

Levi told them about his mother, about Kenny, about Isabel and Farlan, his reason for joining the survey corps, and why he stayed. He dug out all his buried memories, happy and sad, just for the children. He allowed himself to be vulnerable for once. He allowed his unshed tears to be wiped away by their soft little hands. He did it for his children—his joy and happiness.

"My mother was a good person," Levi said at last, his voice husky. "Isabel and Farlan too, but I am not. That's why Kenny left me; that's why everyone I loved left me. I wasn't needed by them; it was always the opposite."

The exhaustion and sleep were making him pour out his heart, or maybe it was that he had come to trust the three nine-year olds enough to let them know the weak side of him.

It was ironic how two years ago he thought of them as a nuisance, and now here he was, calling them his own and telling them things he would never tell anyone. Two years ago, he was looking for ways to get them off his back, to be on his own way and them to be on their own, while now just the thought of being separated from them makes his heart cry and rage like never before.

Once again, a little hand wiped a stray tear away, and Levi could only shut his already drooping eyes in unfathomable pain of his heart and mind.

"You are not a bad person," Armin's little voice said. If Levi had his eyes open, he could see Armin's lips quivering as he spoke. Armin had never seen Levi cry and never knew about his painful past, but now that he knew, he couldn't help but feel Levi's pain as his own.

"And nor are you weak," Eren pitched in, his voice full of raw emotions. "You are as human as any of us."

"And you are not alone," Mikasa added, her own voice shaking. "You have us, and we have you. We need you, just like you needed your mother, Kenny, and others."

"Yeah, you are our mama—" Eren paused, his borrows furrowed as he mused out loud, "Wait, that doesn't sound right."

The other three bursted into laughter; the atmosphere now lighter due to one of Eren's slip-ups. Levi always told Eren to think throughly before speaking, though he couldn't help but adore this 'mildly stupid' side of Eren as well, no matter how silly or embarrassing it sometimes got.

"You are not our mama, but—" Armin said between his giggles, "you are our father figure. You are our papa!"

"Yeah, Papa Levi!" Eren's optimistic voice made Levi smile.

Mikasa hummed as she laid her head down on Levi, the other children following the suit.

"Our papa," she said softly before gently closing her eyes, the smile never leaving her face.

In the peaceful silence of the night, Levi mustered enough energy to crack an eye open to look at the fragile little forms of three children. Their little heads were resting on his chest, rising and falling with his every breath.

"Papa Levi, huh?" The new title Levi was given rolled off his tongue with ease, which made the captain smile. "It has a nice ring to it."

The three children who were not sleeping giggled at Levi's comment, causing the man to blush in embarrassment.

"Oi, quit laughing. You three were the ones who decided to call me that," Levi said, returning to his aloof demeanour.

"Can you hum the song your mother would hum to you?" Eren asked as the giggles died out. "Please."

How could Levi say no to those doe-like eyes? So he gathered all the small fragments of the song his mind had stored and started to hum the song.

The captain felt as if a large boulder had been taken off his shoulder after his talk with the children. The anxiousness he was feeling about returning to the underground had mostly died down, but some negative feelings still lingered in his heart. He knew that a part of him will always have that reaction to the underground, and no comfort or protection can make that feeling go away, but now that he had his three brats—had someone who needed him—Levi felt a little lighter.

"Thank you," Levi mummered sleepily after he had finished humming the song, "for bringing these moments of little happiness in my life."

He knew that the children couldn't hear him because they were asleep, so he wrapped his arms around their sleeping forms protectively, bringing them closer to him.

That night, Levi had one of the best sleep ever; he was surrounded by his little happiness after all.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> Originally wrote this as a Halloween special chapter (2024), buuuuut... I decided to post all the chapters here cause I may write an epilogue for this story (I am kinda feeling motivated to write it now), so, enjoy my dearies~

"Papa!" Eren's voice echoed through the hallway before the physical being of the green-eyed brunet had graced Levi's office with his presence, Mikasa in tow.

Levi knew from the distress that was evident in the eleven-year-old's voice that someone had made fun of his 'one of those moments'.

"What happened now, Eren?" Levi asked without looking up from his paperwork. His reading glasses rested low on his nose, threatening to fall off onto the paper in his hands, but Levi seemed to be not bothered by it.

"I have become a joke," Eren cried dramatically, falling face-first on the couch in Levi's office.

"Eren and I were cleaning the storage with Gunther and Olou when they found a white bed sheet," Mikasa started to explain. "Olou used the bed sheet to dress up like a ghost and jump-scare Eren. But, when Eren shouted his voice—his voice—" Mikasa covered her mouth with her scarf to stifle her laughter only to fail miserably.

Noticing Mikasa' s struggle to contain her laughter, Levi finally directed his attention from his paperwork to the two prepubescents.

"His voice, what?" Levi inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"H-his voice cracked!"

"It did nOt," Eren's hands shot up to his mouth as soon as his voice cracked, his face becoming pink in embarrassment. Mikasa on the other hand hollered with laughter, Levi's snickers joining in.

"My life has suREly become a jOke!" Eren's cries however fell to deaf ears as the Ackermans laughed even harder.

The three occupants of the room were so engrossed in their silliness that they did not notice Armin walking into the room, an amused smile plastered on his face.

"You need to be less dramatic, Eren," Levi said after he and Mikasa recovered from their laughter. "This is a phase that everyone faces, even I did. It's part of growing up," the captain then gestured towards Armin before adding, "Look at Armin, his voice is so high pitched that even we sometimes mistook it as a girl's voice. But he isn't being dramatic about it, is he?"

Armin looked at Levi with an expression of utter betrayal before turning to Eren. "So I take that while you were dramatically fleeing towards Papa's office, you didn't realize that you had knocked down the dirt-filled flower vase in the hallway?"

"He did what?!" Levi was up from his seat as he angrily took off his glasses.

"I told you to look slow down, Eren, but you didn't listen," Mikasa whispered so only Eren could hear, making the brunet sink his embarrassed face further into the fabric of the cushion.

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"We told you that we are sorry, brat," Olou said as he slipped his dirty dish into the sink. "What do you want us to do, get on our knees and beg you?"

Eren silently took the dirty dish with a frown before scrubbing it aggressively, something he had learned from Levi.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" Gunther asked.

"Eren felt very embarrassed after what happened today so he has decided to not talk at all until he grows out of this voice-cracking phase," Mikasa explained as she dried the dishes Eren was handing her before handing them to Armin.

"Not talk until—kid, you know that's impossible, right? This will take months!"

Eren kept glaring at the dishes silently, not bothering to reply to Gunther.

Armin's sigh brought everyone's attention to the blond who was keeping the dishes away.

"Eren has vowed to not speak until he turns 12 at least," Armin said, closing the cabinets before climbing off the stool. "I have been trying to get him to understand that it's impossible, but Eren is too stubborn for his own good," Armin added with a critical look directed at the brunet who ignored him.

Gunther opened his mouth to say something but quickly decided against it once he saw Eren's bright green eyes glaring at him. He couldn't help but notice how similar the children's glares were to Levi's; they had probably learned it from their monotonous caretaker over the years.

Not only their glares, but their combat skills and sword-wielding skills were more or less an exact copy of Levi's techniques.

Mikasa and Eren's combat skills were almost at par with the veterans of scouts, while Armin's quick thinking and big brains were second to Erwin's, and they were just eleven!

Gunther thought about how strong the scouts would become if the children were to join the survey corps in the future, but that was a big if as Levi was absolutely against the idea. But still, Gunther couldn't help but imagine three 'little Levis' with the original Levi in the lead as the four exterminated the Titans.

'Little Levis' was the title that survey corps had fondly given the three children who had been growing up at the scout's headquarters under the care of humanity's strongest for the last five years.

"I bet you won't even last a week, brat," Olou's mocking voice pulled Gunther out of his sea of thoughts. This time not one, but three glares were directed at Olou. Gunther lightly poked Olou to shut up, but the other man seemed to ignore him.

"Why don't we have a bet? If Eren says anything over the course of this week, then he would have to break his stupid vow, and if he wins, then..." Olou glanced at Gunther for help, who got the hint and quickly said without a second thought, "We will do your chores!"

One of Eren's brows shot up in question at the offer, the corner of his lips tugging upwards slightly, while his other two companions just looked at the two men in surprise.

"Y-you both will do Eren's chores?" Armin squeaked. Gunther honestly didn't know why was the offer so surprising to the three.

"I don't believe you both. you don't even do your own chores, let alone Eren's." Mikasa piped in, hands folding across her chest as she looked at two veterans.

Olou shuddered under her uninterested stare which eerily reminded him of Levi.

After a little more back and forth, Eren agreed. The offer was too tempting for Eren to not agree. 'plus, it will be a perfect comeback' Eren thought with a grin. The boy was absolutely positive that he was going to win the bet. If only he knew.

The conversation was brought to a quick end as Levi strode in, a teacup in his one hand and a letter in his other one.

"Erwin has called for a quick meeting," Levi announced, his eyes reading the scribbled words on the letter in a hurry before turning to the two veterans. "To the meeting room, right now!"

Levi turned to the three children as Gunther and Olou scurried out of the kitchen.

"You three done with the dishes?" Levi asked to which the three children nodded with a huge grin on their faces. "And what about your homework?"

"All done!" Mikasa and Armin said in unison while Eren gave the captain a thumbs up and a big grin.

Levi looked at the three with a frown before relenting. "Alright, you three can listen to our mission plan, but no distractions. Got it?"

The way the three children nodded their heads in excitement made Levi smile. What was he going to do with these three?

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The next few days were difficult for Eren. The boy had to constantly remind himself of the challenge he had accepted because it was no secret that Eren (and Hange) were two people who couldn't stay quiet even if their life depended on it. But the brunet was determined, he was going to win the bet and win a month of freedom from chores.

Gunther and Olou, on the other hand, had realized by the third day that Eren was dead serious about not talking, and by the looks of it, Eren was going to win the bet. Panic had set in and the two veterans were desperate to get the boy to talk; they would, absolutely in no way, do the preteen's extra chores for a month.

Thus, the great era of nasty pranks and attempts to get Eren to talk rose. The era didn't last for long, but it was an insufferable time for Eren, Olou and Gunther.

It started with Gunther and Olou trying to trick Eren into speaking. However, their attempts were futile because Mikasa and Armin would always come to the green-eyed boy's rescue.

Then things started getting even more serious as Gunther and Olou took it up a notch. Their attempts turned into pranks to get a reaction out of Eren while the said boy pranked the two veterans in return for revenge.

"Enough!" Levi's voice boomed, making the five people in front of him shuffle in discomfort.

"This—" Levi motioned towards the smashed cake on the floor. "—is getting too much," a piece of frosting leisurely slid down the wall as if to emphasize Levi's point before joining the rest of the destroyed dessert on the floor.

Silence ensued for a while before Eren, soaked in water from head to toe, motioned something with his hands.

"Will you stop miming and speak already?" Levi snapped, tapping his feet against the stone floor impatiently. The captain could tolerate anything except messiness, and the brats had crossed the line by making a mess.

"W-we are sorry, but they started it! They dumped water on us," Armin said quickly, pushing his dripping-wet bangs away from his eyes.

Olou glared at the accusing finger Armin was pointing at him before turning to the short captain in front of them.

"We did nothing, captain!" Olou said loudly, wiping white frosting on his jaw with the back of his palm. "These kids are just making things up to save themselves."

Mikasa, who had been quiet during the whole ordeal, glared at the two veterans before saying, "Is that so? The bucket says otherwise."

Gunther and Olou's faces turned pink in embarrassment as they shuffled a little, revealing a red bucket that was hiding behind their legs during the whole conversation.

Mikasa snorted at the reveal, earning a glare from the two veterans in return.

"Listen, all five of you," Levi said, rubbing his temples. "This is getting too far. You all need to talk it out and put an end to this. The whole squad is suffering because of your shenanigans."

"That's the problem, Cap," Olou said as he dramatically pointed a finger at Eren. "He doesn't want to talk at all!"

"Weren't you the one who initially challenged him? If it weren't for you, Eren might have broken his stupid vow a long time ago!" Mikasa interjected, earning a small, accused glare from Eren who was standing beside her.

"There, there, no need to fight," Armin said nervously, holding his hands against Olou and Mikasa to stop them from attacking each other.

"I don't care about the idiotic vow or what you two—" Olou and Gunther looked dejectedly at the ground as Levi glared at them. "—are up to. All I know is that if you five don't solve this disagreement by tomorrow, I am going to take things into my own hands!" Levi spat angrily before turning to the door and stomping away, but not before stopping midway and barking commands to the other five about cleaning up the mess they had created.

"Well, that was something," Armin muttered to Eren before the two boys turned to the veterans who were having a stare-down with Mikasa. Eren could do nothing more than give a silent, exhausted sigh.

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The two veterans and the three preteens had somewhat made up with each other while they were going through their cleaning punishment, or that's what the preteens thought.

Olou and Gunther had come up with another devious idea, and this time they were sure that Eren's other two companions would not be able to come to help him. The plan was put into action as soon as the green-eyed brunet walked into the bustling mess hall for breakfast.

Olou and Gunther shared a look as the boy met up with his friends before striding to the lengthy line of scouts waiting for their turn to get the food.

Olou got up and strutted towards Eren with a mocking smirk playing on his lips.

"Hey, Eren," Olou slung his arm around the shorter boy's shoulder. "How is my favorite Levi's kid doing?"

Eren silently grunted in response as he ducked out of Olou's hold, the former's face scrunched in disgust as Olou's smelly breath fanned his face.

"Sorry kid, had some eggs and garlic in breakfast today," Olou said with an amused smile, before adding, "Garlic reminds me, do you know about the curse of the vampire lady that haunts this castle?"

Eren cocked his head to the side in confusion, green eyes staring inquisitively at Olou.

"You don't? This is something everyone in the HQ knows! Anyways, a long time ago, when humanity first built the walls almost a hundred years ago, this castle belonged to a lady called Helena. She was known for her beauty, her jet-black hair, her blood-red lips and those mysterious dark eyes. She was also a very rich person, but there was one thing that boggled everyone's mind,"

At this point, Eren had practically forgotten why he was waiting in the line in the first place. The line was long gone while he was still standing with Olou in the middle, hanging on every single word that left the veteran's mouth.

Switching his tone to ominous, Olou continued, "She never came out in the sun, she never bought any food and some people who snuck into the castle found bottles upon bottles of dark red liquid in the pantry, and do you know what the most scariest part is? People in the town were going missing, only to be found later with all their blood sucked outta' them, in other words, dead."

Eren's mouth hung open in horror, causing Olou to chuckle.

"I know, kid, very scary, but I haven't even gotten to the fun part yet!"

Eren leaned in closer, urging Olou to continue his story.

"When the town's people realized that she had been killing their folks, they all gathered and forced her out in the sun, but once she was under the sunlight, Helena turned into ashes!"

Eren's eyes widened in surprise, his mouth ajar as Olou continued narrating the story.

"However, before she was gone for good, her angry screams echoed in the streets, vowing to teach everyone in the town a lesson once her spirit was free. The townspeople, unsure of what to do with her remains and scared of her threat, hid the ashes in a vase; the same vase you knocked over in the hallway."

At this, the poor boy's face paled tenfold.

"You have been lucky, that she hasn't started her haunting yet because, according to my sources, she used to hunt down people every blue moon during midnight, when everyone would be deep in their slumber. But, hey, you might also be lucky because, according to my sources, she would not haunt the person who freed her... She would capture them instead and turn them into a vampire so her legacy could live on. But it's just a silly story. I am sure it's not like she would come to capture you tonight because it's a blue moon."

Olou didn't have to stay to know the poor boy's reaction because even from where he sat with Gunther, Olou could see Eren shivering in his place. The boy didn't move an inch from his

position until his friends came up and helped him to their bench.

Olou and Gunther, on the other hand, shared a proud fist bump for the first part of their plan to go successfully. Now all they had to do was wait for the night to fall.

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Eren grunted as he turned to his side, his back facing the window. The pitter-patter of the rain outside did not lull the boy to sleep like it usually would, instead it filled him with dread of the unknown.

The boy feared that the vampire would be on her way to capture him, or she might even be standing outside the room's door as to speak, but he wouldn't know because the rain outside would muffle all other sounds.

Armin's soft snores didn't help either, instead, it made Eren worry not only about his wellbeing, but his friend's too! At least Eren knew about Helena. His friends, on the other hand, were clueless. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried telling them (using sign language), but Armin and Mikasa had brushed off his worries by calling him superstitious.

Due to the nagging feeling which was probably a mix of dread and worry, Eren slowly pushed himself on his elbows before leaning over the edge of his bunk bed to check if Armin was safe. The said blond was sleeping peacefully with his favorite futon tucked snuggly under his chin.

The small content smile that was playing on the sleeping blond's lips made Eren wonder what his best friend could be dreaming about during the heavy storm outside while he was too scared to even go pee.

As soon as Eren leaned back to lay down on his bed after checking up on Armin, abrupt sounds of footsteps tore through the silence of the hallway, causing the brunet to tense up.

The green-eyed boy desperately hoped that it was one of the veterans who were probably trying to find their way to the kitchen for a midnight snack or water and not the vampire from Olou's story. But much to Eren's horror, the footsteps stopped right in front of his door.

The boy didn't even realize how hard his mouth was clenched until a small, abrupt pain ran through his jaw. So the boy opted for clutching his sheets instead, his nails leaving marks on his palm through the sheets. Forest green eyes, filled with fear and terror, stared at the small shadow that hovered outside the door.

A minute passed.

Then two.

Eren released a breath he didn't even realize he was holding as the footsteps retreated from his door. He huffed out a silent chuckle while running a hand through his messy bed hair.

'I am an idiot', the boy thought. 'believing such a silly story. Of course vampires aren't real, they are just made-up stories to scare children.'

The brunet started to fluff his pillow, ready to fall into a well-needed slumber when his ears caught a muffled sound of a door opening; It wasn't his (and Armin's) room's door, but rather the one leading to the room beside their's.

Eren suddenly flung his blanket away and jumped off his bunk bed with a loud thud, jolting Armin awake.

"Eren?" Armin rubbed his bleary eyes, staring at his friend worriedly as the latter dashed towards the door. "What happened?"

Armin's question fell on deaf ears as Eren ignored the blond and swung the door open, rushing outside with stumbling steps.

'The room beside our's is Mikasa's,' Eren thought to himself as he neared the slightly opened door of his friend's room. 'What if the vampire decided to take Mikasa— NO, I am not letting that happen!'

The brunet heaved out a breath as he pushed the door open, his heart hammering in his chest as adrenaline coursed through his body. But, to his surprise, there was no one in the room except for Mikasa whose still figure laid on her bunk bed, a huge comforter enveloping her completely; even her face was hidden under the soft fabric.

Eren's green eyes studied the room, looking for anything out of the ordinary. The small desk with books and papers were stacked neatly on the side, not a single pen seemed out of place. The chair was tucked under the desk with Mikasa's red scarf hanging off its backrest and the door to her closet was tight shut. The candle on her desk was still lit, but flickering.The serene sight of Mikasa safe and sound relaxed Eren, easing some of his worries.

The boy let out a big exhale, leaning against the door frame as he studied the room once again, before his gaze fell on Mikasa's sleeping figure one more. At that moment, something didn't feel right to Eren, but he wasn't sure what.

A sudden small, warm hand on Eren's shoulder startled the green-eyed boy, causing him to jump back in surprise.

"It's just me, Eren," Armin whispered while holding his hands up in surrender.

Eren placed a hand over his chest, feeling the rhythm of his heart slow down to normal as he gave his friend a pointed look.

"I am sorry, but you are more jumpy than usual today. I just came to check up on you."

Eren waved at the blond nonchalantly, mouthing 'I am fine.'

"Yeah, sure. That's why you had literally jumped off your bed and dashed to Mikasa's room like a madman."

Eren turned his face away in embarrassment, rubbing the back of his neck nervously at Armin's statement.

"Eren," Armin came closer to the nervous brunet, observing his best friend with worry as he spoke, "what is wrong? Why do you look so panicked?"

Eren looked up to meet Armin's ocean-blue eyes, only to freeze as his eyes fell on a figure, a woman more specifically, behind Armin. The sounds of her footsteps were drowned out by the heavy patter of the rain outside. Her long, red dress dragged behind her as she walked in long elegant strides. A flash of lightning outside highlighted her long, inky black hair as she turned the corner, but yet, her face was hidden in the darkness of the night.

"Eren? What happened? Why do you look like as if you had seen a ghost?"

'Because I have', Eren wanted to reply but be stopped himself, swallowing instead as his green eyes flickered back to Armin's worried blue ones. The fear on the brunet's face quickly morphed into determination, his green eyes shining eerily under the dim light of the candle in Armin's hand.

Armin could only sputter in surprise as Eren patted his shoulder before jogging towards the stairs. A single goal repeating in Eren's head like a mantra: I will save my family from that monster.

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Eren wasn't sure what had possessed him to follow the vampire lady without any proper weapons or knowledge to defend himself, or even a source of light. He had impulsively jumped into danger without any preparations and now he was here, using his hands to guide him through the dark hallway, hoping to reach the end without bumping into any furniture on the way.

'Where can she be?' Eren wondered, squinting in the dark to make out the silhouettes of furniture in the hallway. 'it is as if she disappeared into thin air!'

Lost in his thoughts, the green-eyed boy failed to notice a small crack in the floor and ended up tripping and falling face-first on the ground. An abrupt round of pain ran through his nose that made the brunet's eyes sting with tears. With a steady hand and a groan, Eren pushed himself up, using his free hand to gently hold his nose.

Judging from the soft footsteps and the sudden light that flooded the portion of the lengthy hallway, Eren knew that Armin had followed him downstairs.

"Are you okay?" Armin whispered, helping Eren get up.

Eren just shook his head sideways before gently tapping his tomato-red nose.

"It looks bad, you should go to Hange! She must be in her basement lab right now."

A soft cry resonated through the hallway, causing the two boys to go still.

"W-what was that?" Armin's face was pale with fear as he unconsciously gripped his friend's arm.

Eren didn't know for sure either, his mouth felt dry and his hands shook with fear.

'It's her, isn't it?'

With a gulp and an exhale, Eren stepped into the adjoining corridor that led to the storage room, tugging the blond along with him. After what had happened, Eren wasn't planning on leaving Armin alone and by the looks of it, Armin wasn't going to either.

The door to the storage room was left ajar, moonlight from the window opposite to the room bathed the gap in an eerie glow.

"There is nothing here," Armin said, surveying the room with his fearful eyes as the two boys stepped in.

The candle holder in Armin's hand shook a little, causing Eren to realize how scared his friend must be, but once Armin saw Eren looking at him, he straightened his posture while setting his lips into a thin line; it was something he had learned from Erwin.

Eren knew that what he was about to do would only label him as stupid. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to take Armin and run, but the mysteriousness and the eerieness of the situation only urged him to go further into the room.

A loud thud made the two boys realize that the door to the storage room had shut close, making Eren and Armin whip their heads toward the entrance simultaneously. But as soon as their eyes traced the outline of a figure standing in front of the door in the darkness, both boys froze in their spots.

In front of the closed door stood a woman in a red dress and a white sheet covering her face like a veil, making it impossible for the boys to see her face.

"I have finally found you, Eren."

Eren's face paled at the gnarly voice of the vampire; it didn't sound feminine at all! The brunet questioned in his mind whether the vampire had caught a cold, but quickly shook the thoughts away to focus on the situation that was unfolding in front of him.

Everything after happened in a blur; Armin's scream as the vampire advanced towards the boys, a pair of dark hands that blended in with the shadows wrapping around Eren to hold him in place, Armin accidentally dropping the candle in a rush to save Eren, the vampire's loud string of profanities as her veil got caught on fire, the pair of hands that had been holding him in place leaving his shoulders to go and help the vampire who had thrown the veil on the floor and was stomping on it.

"PAPA, SAVE US!"

It wasn't until Eren's voice had finally torn away from his throat when he screamed that he came tumbling back into reality from the shock.

He realized that under the covers of the veil was none other than Olou, who was stomping on the fire to put it out and Gunther, dressed in black from head to toe, was helping the alleged

'vampire'.

Before Eren or Armin could say anything, the door to the storage room had burst open, almost knocking the old wooden door off its hinges. Moonlight flooded into the room, outlining the figure of humanity's strongest at the door who was armed with his swords while still in his night suit and bedhead.

Standing right behind Levi were Mikasa, Petra, Mike, Molbit and Hange, all five peering into the dark room while holding a candle.

"What in the world is going on here?" Levi demanded, glaring at the two veterans who had succeeded in putting out the fire.

It took only one glance at the captain's angry grey eyes for Olou and Gunther to realize that they had messed up big time.

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"I can't believe you both planned all of that just to make me talk," Eren said a little spitefully, leaning his head on the backrest of the wooden chair he was sitting on as he rubbed a finger against his bandaged nose. Even though nothing looked broken, and even the tiny scratches had healed very quickly, Hange had advised him to keep the bandage on for safety reasons.

"Just in case," the older brunette had told him, patting on his shoulder playfully as she continued with an all too familiar glint in her eyes, "Even though it's no secret that your injuries heal up really fast, just like a titan!"

Eren silently snorted at the memory. Leave it to Hange for connecting and comparing everything with titans.

"I think what you mean to say is thank you," Olou replied as he paused his window cleaning to throw a glare at Eren. "We saved you from your voice-less fate, ya know?"

Eren rolled his eyes before replying sassily, "Yeah, sure, and that's probably why you both are doing punishment chores, for 'helping' me."

"Exactly."

"Just admit that you two were afraid of Eren winning his end of the deal," Mikasa said nonchalantly before bringing the teacup to her lips, unaware of all the eyes that stared at her peculiar way of holding the cup, or not as peculiar as it might have been if it weren't for Levi; it was clear to everyone in the room that the younger ravenette had adopted many of the older ravenette's habits, including the captain's strange way of holding the teacups.

"N-no, we were just worried for Eren's wellbeing, that's all!" Gunther piped in, leaning on the stick of his mop as he gave the children a lighthearted grin before adding, "But despite how this all ended, I kinda enjoyed the pranks. Didn't you?"

Eren's lips involuntarily tugged up in a smile as he replied in a soft voice, "I guess so."
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"But it was really bold of you guys to attempt this on the second-floor hallway where Papa's room was," Armin said as he lowered his face into his crossed arms on the table. "Especially when your plan contained making noises by closing and opening the doors. If Papa would have awoken because of those noises—"

"What are you talking about kid?" Olou had turned around from the window, both hands on his hips and his eyes furrowed in confusion. "We didn't go upstairs at all."

"You can now stop with your acting, you know?" Eren said with an irked tone.

"I am telling you, we didn't go upstairs at all!"

Eren was full on glaring at the older man as he spat, "So now you are implying that a ghost was walking in the hallways and it was playing with the doors?"

"Eren, calm down," Mikasa said from her seat, blowing into the cup in her hands. "Hear them out first."

"We are telling you guys the truth! We had removed the water jar and glass from Eren's side table before dinner because everyone knows that Eren has a habit of drinking water in the middle of the night. So we thought that if he didn't find the water jar in his room when he woke up, he would come downstairs to the kitchen to get some, and then we could continue with our plan of scaring him once he was downstairs!" Gunther explained.

"Yeah, we are not that big of an idiot to take a chance with an angry, sleep-deprived and tired captain Levi, even if that's how it ended, unfortunately," Olou added, taking a seat on an upside-down bucket in front of Eren.

Silence fell over the group for a second or two until Armin spoke up, "So you two didn't come upstairs, at all?" Gunther and Olou nodded in reply.

"And it wasn't you both who had opened the door to Mikasa's room?" Eren asked

"What part of 'we didn't come upstairs at all' you don't understand, brat?" Olou snapped.

"B-but I saw a lady with inky b-black hair and r-red dress walking in the hallway, a-and the footsteps! There was d-definitely someone outside my room," Eren stuttered, eyes wide as saucers as he explained the details of what happened during the eerie night.

While the other four occupants of the room were busy discussing the mysterious lady, they failed to notice a small smirk that graced Mikasa's lips as she listened to the conversation.

With the facade of a nonchalant expression, the ravenette thought with the most scheming imaginary voice she could muster, 'They will never know.'

Chapter 10

Eren hastily pulled the hood over his head to cover his face from the rain. Though his attempt was mostly futile as his chestnut brown hair was already soaking wet.

"It seriously had to rain right now?" He whined before turning around to throw a glare at a passing carriage; the cause of muddy water splashed on his denim pants.

"Eren, focus," Mikasa said sternly as she grabbed the brunet's shoulders to turn his attention back to the road. "We need to come up with a believable excuse to tell Papa. The rain is not strong enough of a reason to explain why we are so late to home."

"I wouldn't be surprised if the whole survey corps was hunting for us right now," Armin piped in as he studied the darkening sky. "It must have been at least five hours since our classes ended."

Eren fell silent, his mind trying to come up with reasonable excuses. However, the brunet knew that no matter how good of an excuse he came up with, nothing could save them from Levi's wrath. In their hurry, the three thirteen-year-olds had completely missed the familiar face staring at them from across the street.

"Levi, I found them!" Mike announced to his companions with a shout before running towards the teens.

The brunet and the blond froze simultaneously, not turning to look at the approaching figure while Mikasa greeted Mike in her casual, bored tone.

"Just follow my lead, and we probably won't get into much trouble," Armin quickly whispered to his green-eyed friend before turning to face Mike. However, all of Armin's excuses and plans were chucked out the window when his gaze landed on the angry captain crossing the street.

Levi didn't stop or slow down his pace for the approaching carriages. His deathly glare was fixed on the group across the street as he marched on. Even the carriage drivers were too afraid to ask the captain to move out of the way.

Silence settled over the five once Levi had finally reached the other side of the street. Even though the teens, except Armin, had surpassed the ravenette in terms of height, somehow Levi still seemed to tower over the three; the sight alone made Armin gulp in fear. Levi's glare slowly changed into a stern look, which looked even scarier than the glare in Armin's opinion.

"Explain," was all Levi had said before Armin bursted into tears, guilt overcoming the blond for the actions and the lies he was going to carry out.

"Our classmates were going to have a small get-together after school. We didn't think it would take a lot of time, so we joined them, but—" Armin's shivering hands searched for

Mikasa's and Eren's as he spoke, only to realize once his left hand was left grasping air that his brunet friend hadn't moved a single inch from his previous position.

Eren unconsciously tugged his hood further over his face as he heard Armin ramble on about the 'get together with friends', the blond's nervousness seeping into his tone. Eren knew that Levi would see through the lie if Armin kept that up, but Eren was no better, so he decided to stay out of the conversation. He had half the mind of turning around and risking sleeping on the streets rather than confronting an angry survey corps captain called Levi.

"Is that so?" Levi's eyes were fixed on Eren's back as he spoke. "Eren, would you mind giving me a reason to why you are hiding your face as if you have committed arson?"

Eren could see his life flash before his eyes as he slowly turned around to look at Mike and his guardian. While Mikasa and Armin shot Eren a look that said, 'We will attend your funeral'.

"I-I-we—" Eren stuttered for a good few seconds before lowering his gaze in defeat. "We are sorry."

"I am sorry."

"For what?" Levi's eyebrows were scrunched together in worry as he spoke.

The moonlight casted long shadows on the wooden deck, highlighting the contours of Eren's face. Levi couldn't help but feel stunned for a second at how beautifully his children had matured.

'Where the time has gone?'

Some members of the Levi squad (like Jean) would think that he was fussing over Eren because he was the founding titan and Paradis' monster. Others would think that it was because Eren was Levi's subordinate, but the truth was neither.

Even though six years had passed since Levi last heard the word 'papa' from either of his children's mouths, six years since the four broke the delicate relationship and trust they had built over the years with each other, they were still his kids. Yes, after six long years of treating Eren, Armin, and Mikasa just as subordinates, Levi was silently admitting that he still regarded them as his children.

Every injury, every mission, every tear that his children shed made his heart shatter into pieces. Their every scream, every cry, every trial would want to make him scream in agony and helpless too. But he couldn't do anything about it except hide his feelings; being a captain, he had to treat all his subordinates the same.

No one knew about Levi's helplessness except for Hange and other of his veteran friends when they were still alive. But they too had to treat those three as just subordinates.

Levi could feel the bile coming up his throat as the wild waves rocked the ship side to side. He remembered Onyakapon calling it sea sickness, and Levi had brought a bag full of lemons

with him for precaution. If he remembered it correctly, the sack was in his room below the deck, but he was not ready to leave without a reply. Thus, the captain swallowed the disgusting liquid back down, suppressing the urge to gag after the deed was done.

"What are you sorry for, Eren?" Levi repeated his question in a softer, yet desperate tone. It was as if he was trying to coax the truth out of the brunet—the ugly, hideous truth about Eren that the brunet wanted to keep a secret for as long as he could.

Eren wanted to laugh, to cry, to mourn the loss of his own morality, but he didn't have the time to do so. Once the ship would reach the Marlean shores, Eren would be doomed to his fate. Nothing could stop him now; nothing could save him now, but he could still save his family, his friends, and his home.

Eren sniffled as he wiped his tears away with the back of his hand, the confession on the tip of his tongue.

'I am sorry for what I did, for what I am about to do, and for not doing what I should've done.'

'I don't want to become a monster'

"I am sorry for everything."

Eren blinked rapidly to focus on Levi in front of him. He wasn't sure what he saw, and he for sure won't remember it later. But the strange vision had left the brunet quite disoriented.

"This is what happens when you stay in the rain for too long," Levi said crossly as he started dragging Eren and Armin away by their ears.

"Tch, did you roll in a heap of mud like a pig?" Levi said, eyeing Mikasa's muddy outfit as they walked.

"It was the carriages' fault," Mikasa replied coolly to which Levi tsked disappointedly.

"At least the rain has stopped," Mike interjected in hopes of lightening everyone's mood. Though he only received a disappointed grunt from Levi and a blank stare from Mikasa.

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Once Hange had let go of the three, Patra had taken over, crushing the three into a tight but motherly hug whilst lecturing them along with the other members of the Levi squad. It didn't help that they were standing in the middle of the main hallway of the HQ; the scene was open for all passing veterans to see. Soon Erwin joined the Levi squad as well, lecturing the teens like Mike had done when they were walking back home.

If Eren could, he would have dug a hole right then and there. That way he wouldn't have to handle the embarrassment of all the survey corps veterans watching him and his companions get scolded by their highly esteemed commander for staying out too late.

'But maybe I deserve it. No, I deserve a punishment, not some mild scolding," Eren thought as his eyes wandered to the window.

The stars twinkled like diamonds in the dark sky and it reminded Eren of the plan that he, Armin, and Mikasa had made. They planned on stargazing with Levi tonight, but they were late back home—the cause of this mess. Or maybe this was a result, not the cause. No, the cause of this mess, of why they were late, was something entirely different. It was something Levi would, under no circumstances, accept, and maybe Hange, Erwin, and other veterans wouldn't either.

'Should I tell them the truth?'

"Let's all get back to work; we have wasted a lot of time already," Erwin said, looking at Levi, who nodded his head and started dragging the teens towards the stone staircase.

Even after Levi had taken the teenagers upstairs, Hange, Erwin, and all the other veterans downstairs could hear their angry captain loud and clear, "You three are grounded for a week —no, a month! You three are grounded for a month, and I should not hear any pathetic whines from any of you about going outside until your punishment is over, got it?"

From the silence in response and soft noises of doors closing, the veterans guessed that the teenagers must gone off to their respective rooms.

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For the first time in months, Levi had gotten a chance to go to bed early. With an unusually cheery mood, the captain fluffed his pillow before plopping down on his plush bed. He felt such happiness and glee that he even decided on ending Eren, Armin, and Mikasa's punishment earlier.

"It's already been two weeks; I should unground them for being such good brats," Levi mumbled to himself, sleepy as his eyelids started to flutter shut. Then the captain did the most rarest thing ever; he smiled. Yes, that is how happy he felt to be able to go to bed early.

However, all of Levi's cheery was crushed to pieces when an obnoxious knocking reached his ears. With a sigh, the captain stomped to the door, ready to give the person on the other side of the door a piece of his mind.

"What the $@#*? do you want at this—" Levi's voice trailed off as the door opened to reveal pairs of green, grey, and blue eyes staring at him.

Eren had his fist raised midway for another knock, which he quickly retracted when Levi eyed it. A wave of déjà vu washed over him at the situation.

Mikasa, on the other hand, was leaning against the wall casually. Her cold gaze darted from one person to another in mild amusement.That was the moment when Levi decided that he was, in fact, not going to shorten the brats' punishment.

Leaning against the door frame tiredly (which was more or less identical to Mikasa's posture), Levi gave a big yawn. Then he looked at the teens with boredom and drawled, "What's wrong?"

"We were wondering if you would like to join us for stargazing," Eren said, Armin nodding along before adding, "I heard there is going to be a meteor shower tonight!"

The captain's red-rimmed eyes squinted at the trio suspiciously. After pondering the offer for a while, Levi agreed with a shrug of his shoulders and a small 'sure.' Thus, the four found themselves in the highest tower of the HQ.

"Are these the experimental candies that Four Eyes made?" Levi asked as he studied a small jar of yellowish-green candies in his hand.

"Yes! We couldn't find anything else to bring except this, so I thought it would make a decent midnight snack," Armin chirped as he straightened out his favourite peach futon.

"There is always a leftover bread in the pantry, you know," Levi mumbled as he eyed a minuscule rip in Armin's worn-out futon. The ravenette had lost count of the times he had patched that faded thing up.

Eren shook his head vigorously before replying, "Yes, but the candies taste so yummy!"

"Those taste like grass."

"These look nice, though," Mikasa piped in.

"Those look like frozen cubes of puke."

Levi watched with amusement as the teens stared back at him in horror. Then they turned their horrified gazes at each other before finally directing suspicious glares towards the seemingly innocent jar of candies.

'But I think Hange will be more than ecstatic to know that someone likes her experimental candies,' Levi thought.

In a minute or two, the four were settled down in their respective futons under the vast blanket of the night sky. Armin rambled on about the constellations while Eren tried to point out some himself (and failed miserably). Mikasa would pipe in every now and then to add on to Armin's explanations.

Levi, on the other hand, didn't even utter a word. He would only give a hum of approval or a grunt of disappointment every time the children urged him to speak. The captain felt satisfied in just listening to the teens yap, all the while revelling in the feeling of familial love.

The lively chatter was soon replaced with low snores as Levi, one by one, tucked the sprawled teens back into their futons. With a gentle hand, he brushed their hair away from their forehead before placing a small peck.

'Tch, what should I do with these?' he thought fondly as he gazed at the slumbering faces of his children.

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continued, "I don't want to leave Papa alone, and I know that neither do you both, so wouldn't it be better if you guys stayed here, beside him?"

"You are not the only one who lost loved ones that day, you know?" Armin said calmly, focusing on removing the wrinkles from his futon. The unusual coldness in the blond's tone made the other two shudder. "I am joining the cadet corps because I want to. After all, I am free to choose my path, aren't I, Eren?"

Eren found himself dumbfounded and startled as Armin's piercing blue eyes bore into his. For the first time, his words and ideology were being twisted and used against him; the brunet couldn't help but feel that the blame goes to no other than Erwin and Levi. Children, after all, learn from the adults.

After a moment of heavy silence, Eren's gaze darted back to Mikasa. The moonlight catching the green of his eyes, giving him a look of hope and innocence. "Mikasa?" He didn't have to say anything more for the said ravenette to understand his question.

'Why are you joining the survey corps?'

Mikasa looked away from Eren's pleading green eyes. She nervously pulled her scarf up her nose before settling on a well-rehearsed reply, "I already told you I will follow whatever you do. If you choose to stay, then I will too. I don't want to lose any more family."

The invisible weight on Eren's shoulder got heavier with each of Mikasa's words. His hands suddenly felt cold, colder than ever before. With a foreboding feeling heavy in his heart, Eren grasped Armin and Mikasa's hands, and for a fleeting second he felt safe.The warmth of his friends' hands seemed to ground his raging thoughts.

"The main question is, when do we tell him?" Mikasa asked as she settled cross-legged on the floor, her futon lying in an abandoned heap beside her. "We only have a week left after all! Leaving without a word is not an option. Nor can we just wait for the cadet corps carriage to show up on the doorsteps before we tell him."

Eren didn't know how to reply. He had been waiting for his 12th birthday for years, so he would finally be able to sign up for the cadet corps. But now that everything was done, how was he to face his foster father and tell him about his departure? Levi would be sad, angry, but most of all, heartbroken. Eren, for once, didn't know what to do.

"You know, Levi never specifically said anything against joining the cadet corps," Armin's voice pulled Eren out of his sea of thoughts. He stared at his blond friend in confusion, processing the words that had left the blond's lips seconds ago.

"He has been only against the idea of us joining the survey corps, not the cadet corps," Eren repeated, his eyes widening with realization. "Because from the cadet corps, we can join either the survey corps or the garrisons—"

"Or the military police," Armin finished Eren's sentence with a smile. But the celebration was short lived as sounds of heavy footsteps filled the air. After sharing a panicked look, the trio quickly got into the act of busying themselves in arranging their futons.

'Could he have heard all that?' Mikasa wondered as her nimble fingers untangled the wrinkles her dull gray futon.

Mere seconds after Mikasa had had thought that, Levi strode out of the tower door with a small sack dangling from his hand. Unlike the three teens, the captain seemed completely unbothered by the chilly weather.

Mikasa could feel her rapidly beating heart slow down when Levi nodded at her in a silent greeting. His expression assured her that the older ravenette was still oblivious to the three's secret. The feeling of relief turned into something sour as Mikasa replayed the previous thought in her mind. It didn't sound nice to her, nor fair.

"I brought these from the pantry," Levi said as he dumped the contents of the sack on a piece of cloth that he had brought with him. As the dry loaves of bread and cubes of cheese hit the cloth with a thud, Levi turned to three teens with a serious face and said, "Eating leftovers is better than getting diarrhea from those candies."

Let's just say that Levi's experience with Hange's experimental candies hadn't gone well.

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Papa," Levi had his cup halfway to his lips before Eren had interrupted his tea time break. "Can we talk?"

With a raised eyebrow, the captain shot a glance at the resting new recruits (who were complaining about ruthless training to each other) and then threw a very questioning look at Eren.

Eren, Armin, and Mikasa were well aware of the fact that Levi did not like to be bothered during the training sessions. He was already struggling enough with training the new recruits, and any interruptions would send him on the edge. So it was quite a surprise for Levi when the trio had chosen such a time to talk with him.

After making sure that the new recruits were not goofing off, Levi turned to the three teens and motioned them to come sit with him on the bench.

"Sorry for disturbing you during your work," Armin quickly said as he sat down across from the captain along with the other two.

The three had contemplated the situation quite a lot, as they didn't want others at the HQ to learn about their plans yet. Breaking the sudden news to Levi was hard enough; they didn't want to go around explaining to everyone else at the HQ about their decision. To the three, it felt like announcing to everyone about their betrayal to Levi. Thus, after nights of brooding, the three settled on the timing of the new recruits training sessions. After all, it was the only time of the day they could talk with Levi alone without someone butting in every two seconds.

Levi waved a hand in dismissal as he replied, "It's fine. What did you three want to talk about?"

Armin and Mikasa looked at Eren, who gulped and twiddled with his thumbs. 'Now or never,' he told himself before stuttering out, "You see that after Wall Maria fell—we—uh—you know—"

"Eren, Armin, and I have signed up for the cadet corps training camp, and we are to leave in a week. You didn't seem very supportive of the idea, so we kept it a secret until now," Mikasa said, the slight shake in her voice betraying her confident expression.

Levi's eyes went wide and his hand froze. He looked at the teens in front of him over the rim of his cup. His lips parted to say something, but no words came out. The shock on the captain's face made the trio turn their gaze downwards in shame.

No one dared to break the silence that had settled over the four like a heavy blanket. Eren even squeezed his eyes shut, preparing for the moment when Levi would demand for an explanation.

"Then why are you three here? Why are you telling me this if everything is already done? Why tell me when you already did what you desired?" Eren could hear Levi say in his mind. In another scenario, Eren imagined Levi saying, "I am not going to allow you to join a suicide squad! If you still keep insisting, then you might as well stop considering me as your guardian! What is the use of my advice or care if you are going to just toss them aside like trash?" With each imaginary scenario, Eren could feel the weight on his shoulders getting heavier and heavier; if it was a tangible weight, Eren would have been crushed under it by now.

"Tch, so you three planned this behind my back even when I strictly told you not to, and now you are leaving in a week," Levi said, his tone unpleasant but surprisingly casual. "Here I was thinking that you three would never tell me and leave without a word."

Eren's head shot up in surprise, his worries and guilt replaced with shock. Armin and Mikasa's expressions were almost identical to Eren's, eyes wide and mouth hanging open in shock. None of them could utter a word as all three of them were busy trying to grasp what had transpired in the last few seconds.

"Tch, close your mouths; you three look extremely stupid."

The trio quickly composed themselves and settled back into their initial posture. Levi gave his usual, disappointed tch in reply as he sipped on his tea.

He smacked his lips with a frown and eyed the warm cup in his hand, before muttering, "Who added so much sugar to my tea?"

"How did you know?" Eren was the first one to break the silence in his usual, hasty way of blurting out questions.

Levi stopped shooting deathly glares at the new recruits to look at the three teens. Draping a hand across the backrest of the chair, Levi replied in his usual drawl, "What do you mean by how? You expect me to not pick up on your unusual behaviour for the last few weeks? I also found the poster for cadet corps sign-up under your mattress while I was re-making your

messily made beds some time ago. I heard part of the conversation last night as well." Leaning forward on the table, Levi continued in a serious tone, "I can't keep you three locked in here forever; you have to learn to live, learn to forge your own path. All I can really do is advise you three, nothing more."

"Life as a soldier isn't easy, but a simple civilian life isn't full of sunshine and rainbows either. My advice is that you three should choose something other than the Survey Corps once you graduate. At least that way I would at least be able to continue talking to you three as a guardian and not as a strict captain, nor watch any of you die on the battlefield. Heck, you can even join the military police if the Garrisons don't fit with you!"

"But—"

"Eren, you want to make a difference? Do you want to change this corrupted place? Then try changing the core military first. No one in the survey corps needs changing; we already know that we can be better than this. Yes, it's true that we don't even know the ABCs about the outside world; we are just blindly kicking in the deep ocean to stay afloat. Despite that, however, we stay stubborn because we are visionaries, or at least Erwin is, but a lot is there to change in our core military; the military closet to the government. Change in survey corps is not going to change our society, but the change in military police will. The choice is yours."

An abrupt shouting drew everyone's attention at the table to the arguing new recruits. The verbal fight turned into physical punches and shoves in a matter of seconds, forcing Levi to leave the table and break up the fight.

Whereas Eren, Armin, and Mikasa stared at the spot where Levi had been sitting before. Neither one of them spoke a word for a while as they were all thinking the same thing: Did that really happen?

"I guess Levi isn't against the idea of us joining the cadet corps after all," Armin said at last, looking at his friends with a bright smile and shining blue eyes. "We were worrying for nothing!"

"But he still doesn't like the idea of us joining the survey corps. He did, however, give us the option to choose," Mikasa turned to Eren and continued, "And he also gave us some valid points, you know?"

But Eren was too deep in his thoughts to reply. He gave a small, dispassionate hum in reply, all the while imagining how his life as Levi's subordinate will be once he joins the Survey Corps.

'Man, I really hope I could climb up the ranks quickly and become a part of the Levi squad."

Oh, how he would wish in the coming years that someone could have known and warned him of the brutal end waiting for him, and all because of the path he chose! He would even wish he had never joined the Survey Corps at all.

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Soon after Armin, Eren, and Mikasa had discussed with Levi about their approaching departure, their decision about joining the cadet corps was announced to everyone else at the HQ. For the following days, most of the scout veterans would approach the trio with teary eyes, advice for the future, and some sort of parting gift. It was quite a shock for them to be told that the trio were joining the cadet corps, especially after Levi had been hellbent on keeping them under his wing forever. Thus, no one had ever thought about the little Levies leaving their nest at all!

Surprisingly, Levi was the most calm one of all; he hadn't even shed a single tear, rather busying himself in helping the trio prepare for the next step of their lives. Even Erwin had given a sniffle or two as he patted the three teens on their backs before hurrying off to his office to let out the sobs he was holding in. Hange had full on cried in front of the crowded dining hall, clutching the teens in a tight hug while crying something about gremlins growing up too quickly.

Before anyone knew it, the day had finally arrived. It was chaos, at least for Eren, Armin, Mikasa, and Levi.

"Armin, did you keep the medical herbs Hange had stored for you? No? Are you stupid? You know how easily you get sick. Pack them right now!"

"Mikasa, stop panicking because I have your scarf right over here. I had to give that filthy thing one final wash before you leave. Who knows if you will ever wash it afterwards?"

"Oi, brat, what do you think you are doing? Who gave you the permission to stuff all those knives in your bag? Eren, you have until the count of three to keep the knives back from where you found them before I take out the slippers. One. Two. You better run—" (boss music intensifies)

Almost the whole survey corps was standing in front of the HQ's entrance to see Eren, Armin and Mikasa off. The veterans took turns to give the trio a heartwarming and a memorable farewell. While Levi, on the other hand, was busy fussing over the three; fixing Eren's wild hair, lecturing Armin to not overwork himself, fixing Mikasa's scarf, or just lightly patting the teens' hairs for no particular reason.

After the trunks had been loaded onto the carriage, the three teens turned to Levi for one last goodbye.

"Be good brats, alright? And don't you dare forget to write me! 'Kay?"

"Yes, Papa," the trio chorused before enveloping the older man in a last embrace.

"We are going to come back, Papa, and we are going to come back as soldiers. We will make you proud," Eren said as he hugged the ravenette tighter.

"Take care, you three," Levi whispered back as he circled his arms around the three gently.

'And please don't forget me,' but the captain kept his woeful thought to himself.

Eren kept stealing glances back at his guardian as he neared the carriage door, the warmth of the last embrace still lingering in his mind. His hands felt clammy, his breathing quickened, and he felt oh so cold; he was feeling like a lost little kid.

'You will be back, Eren,' the brunet told himself as he clutched the curvey door handle tightly, resisting the urge to run back to Levi, to Hange and Erwin, to the Levi squad. Fighting the urge to run back to his family. With one last glance at the HQ, Eren followed Armin and Mikasa into the dainty little carriage, closing the the carriage door behind him with a soft click.

"Take care, you three," Petra shouted as the carriage started to drive away.

"Let everyone know at the cadet corps the power of titan science!" Hange shouted soon after, earning disapproving looks from others around her.

Levi, however, didn't bother with the shenanigans going on around him. He had his eyes trained on the dark green carriage until it was out of sight, and even after the crowd started dispersing, the ravenette didn't leave his spot. It wasn't until Erwin and Hange partially dragged the captain away from the spot that Levi decided to return back inside.

While Eren, Armin, and Mikasa couldn't help but stare at the HQ from the carriage windows with downcast expressions. At this point, only the tallest tower of the HQ castle was visible over the crowded houses of downtown Trost district. The same castle that was housing five years worth of memories of the three. Every blood, every sweat, every cry, and every hard work of the soldiers was engraved in the walls of the centuries-old castle. But that was not all, for the trio, their every tear, every laugh, every embrace, and every scolding was also engraved in the stone walls of the HQ; it was their home.

"Goodbye, everyone," Eren sniffled against the glass pane as the tower disappeared behind thick clouds. It was then Eren realized that he had been crying ever since he had entered the carriage.

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Levi was having a hard time getting sleep at night. He kept tossing and turning in his bed to no avail. After an hour passed, the captain had enough, and decided to head down to the pantry to get some food for his raging hunger.

Levi had kept himself so immersed in his paperwork all day that he had skipped all meals. Thus, coming to the conclusion that it was the hunger driving him restless, and some food in his stomach would help him fall asleep after such an overwhelming day.

When walking in the dark hallway, Levi purposefully looked away from the two particular oak doors that were lined against the wall like hundreds of others. He had to fight the urge to walk into the rooms that laid beyond the two doors, the two rooms that were occupied until the night before but now stood empty and dark.

The ravenette increased his pace to pass the hallway quickly before memories that reminded him of the owners of the two rooms broke down the walls that he had build around himself. He refused to let himself fall into the deep ravine of sadness again. But little did Levi know that food wouldn't help calm his unrest at all.

"Bread and cheese," Levi snarled as he glared at the only leftover food in the pantry, memories of the peaceful stargazing nights invading his mind.

Levi had made a resolve to stay away from everything that would remind him of Eren, Armin, and Mikasa. But when his stomach rumbled in hunger and the only food left in the pantry held the memories of the trio, Levi had no choice but to break his promise.

Snatching the loaf of bread and a small cube of cheese from the shelf, Levi leaned against the kitchen counter and took a bite from the dry loaf. The ravenette scrunched his face distastefully as the bread crumbled in his mouth but didn't discard the loaf into the bin. Living in the underground had taught him the importance of food, and under no circumstances was he going to throw away edible food.

"I hope those three are fed well at the cadet corps," Levi said to himself as he gazed out the window wistfully.

'Should I have let them go?'

The captain whacked himself at the thought whilst scolding himself, 'Get a hold on your emotions, Levi. They are perfectly capable of choosing their own path. I cannot force my decisions on them.' Returning his gaze back outside, Levi whispered to himself with a bittersweet smile, "It's not like I am not going to see them again."

'But nothing would stay the same if they join the survey corps.'

A tear slid down Levi's cheek, followed by another, then another. Unable to control himself any longer, the ravenette brought a hand to his eyes and sniffled loudly.

'When was the last time I cried like this? When mom died?'

Levi slid down to the floor, burying his face in his knees as violent sobs racked his body.

'Why am I crying? They are not dead. They just—they just left me.'

"We are going to come back, Papa, and we are going to come back as soldiers. We will make you proud." Eren's words rang through his ears, calming Levi down a bit, but yet he continued sitting there with endless tears cascaded down his face.

'They promised they are going to come back,' Levi reminded himself as his sobs decreased to sniffles. 'They didn't leave me. They are going to return someday.'

The loud chimes of the grandfather clock echoed through the hallways, reminding the captain that a fresh day awaited for him ahead. Wiping the salty tears away, Levi stood up and ran a hand through his messy hair. After making sure he looked presentable enough if he was to stumble across someone on his way back to his room, Levi exited the kitchen.

'I am going to see them again.'

And he did; Levi saw Eren, Mikasa, and Armin again after three years.

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"Hey, you brats. What's going on here?"

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"Say, Eren."

"Y-yes pa—er—sir?"

"Do you hate me?"

"N-no... I understand the act you put up needed to be believable."

"Good, then."

'I am sorry, Eren. I didn't wanted to hurt you'

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"He is a real monster, I know that much and not at all because of his titan powers. No matter how much force he is held down with, no matter how strong the cage he is placed in, no one will be able to make his spirit submit to their will."

'I know because I raised him after all'

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"Armin. Thanks to you getting blood on your hands, no one in our squad ended up dead. Thank you."

'I am sorry.'

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"Kenny 'Ackerman'... A relation of yours perhaps?"

"When my parents were still alive... they told me that my father's family, the Ackerman bloodline, was persecuted inside the cities."

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"Give Up On Your Dreams And Die For Us. I Will Take Down The Beast Titan."

The white paper rosette, now red with blood, was buried under the ground along with the commander.

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"I never thought I did see you like this. That face...Like every rotting piece of $@#*@ I saw in the underground."

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"Keep watching over us."

The blue, worn out, paper rosette that was tucked carefully under Hange's cape burned into ashes along with the purple scribbled words 'world's best scientist'.

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"There was... a whole lot I wanted to tell the idiot but... Damnit."

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"Guess this is the result. Of all your devoted hearts."

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'Good bye, Eren'

End Notes

Hello everyone!

Some of you might have seen this story on places like quotev and Wattpad, so just for your confirmation; yup, this is a repost of my story, from other platforms, here!

So this was supposed to be the initial intro page, but I guess I will just post it here instead:

Alternate universe:

- Time line a little altered for the purpose of this fanfiction

- Eren saves Mikasa when he is six and Mikasa is seven: he does not kill the kidnappers but rather injure them to buy time for him and Mikasa to run away. THEREFORE HE IS STILL AN INNOCENT BABY WHO HASN'T KILLED A SINGLE SOUL....yet

- Armin and Eren are 7, and Mikasa is 8 when the colossal titan first appears

- Eren is 7 when he is given the injection and like the anime/manga, he does not remember

- Mr Hannes died saving Mikasa and Eren

- Levi joined Survey Corps like an year or two before the fall of wall Maria in canon, so I will be just rolling with that

- Levi is in his early twenties around the starting of this story

- Levi squad was made after the fall of Wall Maria, some months before Levi 'adopts' Eren, Mikasa and Armin in this story

About the writing:

- written in past tense

- anything like: $@#* or similar to this means the character is cursing

- platonic relationships

- Characters might get a little occ

- Written from third person POV

- I don't know the exact location of the survey corps HQ in the manga/anime, so I am just going to be using Trost as survey corps HQ's location

That's it for the intro! I will try to update this story every week Wednesday. Remember: Live, love, laugh tiramisu ✌

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!